

Conserving surface water is the way out

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MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

ON March 8 newspapers reported that Wasa-supplied water in many areas has become unsuitable for drinking or even for household chores. Water has become so scarce that homemakers in Mirpur complain that they are using the same water for washing rice, dal and fish, and most people are bathing every three or four days. Many people are suffering from stomach ailments and diarrhoeal diseases because of the polluted water.

Dhaka Wasa sources say that they can supply about 194 crore litres of water against a demand of 205 crore litres a day. But to any observer it will appear that there must be some gaps and loopholes in the current estimate of the demand and also of the supply.

Experts say that over-extraction, rapid urbanisation, lack of retention points, pollution in peripheral waterways, and a natural "impermeable" clay layer have combined to push the level down to an unreachable depth.

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In 2001, deep tubewells could strike water at a depth of 200 to 300 feet, but now they have to go to about 1000 feet to get uninterrupted supply. The rapid depletion of open spaces, wetlands, canals, and rivers, and an annual population growth of about 10 lakh, leave no space for the ground water to be recharged.

With about 85 percent of the water coming from groundwater and only 15 percent from surface water supplied through treatment plants at Sayedabad and Chadnighat, Godnail and Sonakanda, Wasa's effort to reduce dependence on ground water and use both the sources can hardly be fruitful.

But once a brake is applied to extraction, groundwater will automatically get recharged.

As I traveled through Khulna, Jessore and Shatkhira, I saw to my horror that the water crisis has assumed horrendous proportions. People are buying water from water agents. They are bathing and washing utensils and clothes in the polluted derelict ponds. In most places of North Bengal, hand driven tubewells have become dysfunctional because the water table has fallen beyond the extractable limit. In a word, the picture is grim.

Shockingly, the development mandarins are not aware of the damage they are doing to the environment. Instead of focusing on long-term solutions, every government has found it easier to exploit groundwater. While for the government it meant less investment, for the farmer it was almost free water to irrigate his land.

It is true that the country's food security was propelled by the tubewell revolution, but it led to long-term damage as the pump culture has wrought havoc on the hydrological cycle. This is why water management issues must be considered in tandem with housing, health and social development.

As the developing world becomes urbanised, the water crisis will deepen. Hydrologists say that the world's water supply is finite -- less than a million cubic kilometres -- which, according to the United Nations, is not sufficient for its population.

In the context of such a terrifying pros-

pect, Bangladesh has to take some aggressive measures to conserve its water resources. Buriganga and Shitalakhya, once sources of fresh water, have shown marked falls in levels of dissolved oxygen -- a key indicator of increased pollution by sewage.

An estimated 90 percent of sewage of Dhaka city and Narayanganj is discharged into the rivers and lakes of these cities without treatment. To make things worse, supplies of fresh water that might dilute the sewage are also dwindling. These rivers, which are among the most polluted in the world, contain ten times as many bacteria from human waste as the rivers in developed countries.

Uttara Lake has been reduced to a narrow creek because of indiscriminate dumping of wastes and household garbage. With effluents, sewage and wastewater flowing into the lake for the last three decades, the bed of the lake has silted up. It now serves as a giant sewer. The adjoining places on both sides of the lake reek with the horrible stench coming from the lake.

Normally, rivers and water bodies have the capacity of self-purification -- pollutants are diluted and slowly absorbed -- but with the lake silting and drying up and wastewater discharges increasing by the day, the death of the lake is inevitable. Dhaka Wasa has started constructing underground rainwater drainage pipelines at Uttara that will divert wastewater and sewage flow from the lake.

Uttara, Baridhara and Gulshan lakes can be abundant sources of freshwater if



The long queue and wait for water in Dhaka localities.

we take steps to excavate them. It is worth mentioning that Laxmi Tal Lake in Jhansi and Naini Tal lake in Uttaranchal in India were recovered through government initiative and community participation. If the lakes in Dhaka city could be given a fresh lease of life, we may not have to walk up to Jamuna River for a bucket of water.

Our country, however, does not seem to be clear about its own mission in the face of determined and reckless destruction of natural wealth like water and forest resources. Because we get sufficient rain during monsoon and our villages, towns and cities go under heavy-deep water in consequence of the waist surge from the riparian countries, we tend to care less

about utility and conservation.

Officials and politicians are now reluctantly agreeing that the simple task of collecting rainwater and letting it percolate down is vital to recharge depleted underground aquifers. While the present AL-led government is on its avowed mission to rejuvenate the old canals by demolishing the illegal structures built over them, it could hardly fight shy of the onerous responsibility of restoring Uttara, Gulshan and Baridhara lakes to their past glory.

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Deepening democracy

Only the future will tell whether the optimism generated by the third front is justified. That both the Congress and the BJP are mocking at its birth shows that they are jittery. On the other hand, what happens if the Pakistan People's Party and the Muslim League fight for supremacy? The crisis will start all over again.

KULDIP NAYAR

TWO things of import happened on the same night in Pakistan and India a few days ago. The first was the reinstatement of deposed Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhary and nine other judges. The second was the meeting of most non-BJP and non-Congress parties in India to constitute a third front to give the country another alternative after the Lok Sabha elections so as to do away with the communal politics of the BJP and Sonia Gandhi's one-person rule in the Congress.

No doubt, the battle at Lahore was far more important to save democracy in Pakistan. By restoring the judges who had earned the ire of the then President

General Pervez Musharraf, the lawyers, the media and the civil society have sent a message that the Pakistan judiciary cannot be trifled with.

By clearing the ground for the third front, the opposition parties have asserted that if democracy is to be saved in India it has to be deepened and pluralistic. What the Long March in Pakistan has shown is the same determination -- deepening democracy. Chief Justice Chaudhary may well be the guardian of Pakistan. That he has the support of the intelligentsia makes things easier for him. But he will fail the nation if he does not cleanse the tables.

The third front in India too has a lot of work to do to clear the mess that the Congress and the BJP have piled up for

years. The biggest crime the two parties have committed is to politicise the ills in the society to stay in power. With musclemen and money, they have destroyed the values. They want to corner enough seats so that no combination reaches 272 in the 545-member Lok Sabha without the support of either of them.

However, the parties that constitute the third front suffer from one handicap; each one of them has been part of the alliance that the Congress or the BJP has forged. This does rub off their claim to a principled stand. Yet the visionary paper which the elements in the Left are drafting may retrieve their standing and attract voters if it can make the people believe that the third front parties will provide jobs to everyone and a roof above their head.

Pakistan already has a visionary document, the Charter of Democracy, which the late Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif signed at London. The document affirms its commitment to fight against "the mockery of the constitution and representative institutions, growing poverty, unemployment and inequality and brutalisation of society." The Charter calls upon the people of Pakistan "to join hands to

save our motherland from the clutches of military dictatorships."

I wish the Long March had included in its program the implementation of the Charter. Indeed, I was taken in by Nawaz Sharif's statement, while joining the march, that it was a revolution. But a revolution should mean something for the common man, groaning under the weight of poverty. If Pakistan does not shed feudalism, has no land reforms and rejects the steps for a welfare state, the independence of the judiciary, however important, will not do. But who will initiate the process? Zardari and Prime Minister Yousuf Reza Gilani are big landlords while Nawaz Sharif is a top industrialist.

A similar dilemma confronts the third front, but the CPI (M) has said in its manifesto that the state will minimise the inequality between the rich and the poor. Will the other constituents of the front own this as their poll plank? The CPI (M) patriarch, Jyoti Basu, has rightly advised the party to join the government if the third front is in a position to form the government. Both India and Pakistan should realise that democracy without social justice is a shell without content.

However jubilant Pakistan is it has to

reckon with the army, which has its own identity. All visiting dignitaries call on General Pervez Ashfaq Kayani just as they call on the president and the prime minister. Implementing the Charter of Democracy will mean reducing the importance of the armed forces. Is this possible? The recent crisis could have easily brought back Kayani. But he himself was determined not to interfere. Nor did his friend, America, want him to do so. This only underlines the power that the army wields.

I recall when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto assumed power in 1971 after the emergence of Bangladesh. I asked him how he would ensure that the military would not come back. He said if ever such a thing happened, mere log (my people) would come on the streets and fight against the tanks. Nothing like that happened when General Zia-ul-Haq took over. There were more protests in India on Bhutto's hanging than in Pakistan.

The Charter has not said anything about the inquiry on Bhutto's hanging. Interestingly, there is a proposal to appoint a commission to "examine and identify the causes of and fix responsibility and make recommendation on the light thereof for incidents like

Kargil." At least India would like Zardari's government to have such a commission if the charter has not been dead with the assassination of Benazir Bhutto.

The third front does not have to fear a military takeover. But the ambitions of its political leaders make it look like a ladder to climb up to prime minister-ship. The other day, Mayawati made it clear that she would join it if she was nominated as the prime minister. Ultimately, she agreed that every party would keep its options open and decide about the leader after the elections. The differences were too many to be resolved.

Only the future will tell whether the optimism generated by the third front is justified. That both the Congress and the BJP are mocking at its birth shows that they are jittery. On the other hand, what happens if the Pakistan People's Party and the Muslim League fight for supremacy? The crisis will start all over again. The two will have to join hands for the betterment of Pakistan, like the third front constituents for India's sake. Somehow, it sounds like wishful thinking.

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South Asia in troubles

The region's democratic achievement is not to be decried: the leaders now awash in a sea of troubles have been legitimately elected to the high offices they occupy, and have not simply assumed them, as was often the case in the past. But the political structures in several countries of the region seem fragile, and democracy alone has not solved the difficult underlying problems.

SALMAN HAIDAR

IN a fairly rapid transformation, South Asia, which seemed relatively stable, has once more become a place of political turmoil. Several of the countries of this region find themselves enmeshed in unexpected internal problems and seem headed for more. It was not so long ago that South Asians could congratulate themselves on having found answers to besetting political problems through electoral methods.

A tide of democracy seemed to have swept over the region, offering fresh hope of better mutual cooperation and a reduction of divisive tensions. The region's democratic achievement is not to be decried: the leaders now awash in a sea of troubles have been legitimately elected to the high offices they occupy, and have not simply assumed them, as was often the case in the past. But the political structures in several countries of the region seem fragile, and democracy alone has not solved the difficult underlying problems; nor does the necessary

forbearance and tolerance of opposition views seem to come naturally to all those currently in authority, democratically elected though they may be. Ever-present rumours and fears of dark conspiracies complicate the tasks of governance. From the vantage point of New Delhi, one sees confusion and uncertainty in all directions.

The most recent democratic gain was in Bangladesh where just a few months ago Sheikh Hasina was swept into power through a transparent and fair election. The shadowy army-backed regime that had exercised authority for a couple of years moved out of the way and left the field to the democratically restored Prime Minister. But even as the new administration was getting on with its programme, Bangladesh was rocked by a mutiny in the paramilitary BDR. What happened and why has become a matter of sharply differing assessment. The scale of the event, its violence, and several as-yet unexplained features have led many observers in Bangladesh to look for deeper and wider causes, so that the

country is rife with conspiracy theories and many different explanations have been put forward and diverse accusations made.

Although official inquiries are in progress, the doubts and accusations have not abated. This has struck at the government's standing and complicated its task. Sheikh Hasina is a courageous and forward-looking leader. She is regarded as friendly towards India, which can ignite suspicion in the badly fractured polity of Bangladesh. In 1996 she was bold enough to join with India in an accord on the sharing of the Ganga waters, thus eliminating a problem that had sometimes seemed no less intractable than that of Kashmir. Now, she faces a tough challenge to restore her authority and get on with the business of governing her country.

In India's Himalayan neighbour Nepal, the hard-won gains of democracy seem under threat. There is a faint echo of events in Pakistan when one considers how political rivals in Kathmandu were able after a long dispute to combine and dislodge a leader who had arbitrarily assumed an excess of power, but then found it difficult to maintain their unity of purpose as the former Head faded away. In Nepal, the Maoists constitute the largest party in Parliament and have been in control of the government for some three years. But they have not succeeded in adequately providing what the people demand and have come under public pressure to perform.

Across the southern tip, events in Sri Lanka have raised fresh concerns.

Militarily, the government is going strong and there seems no stopping its campaign against the LTTE, which is being pushed into an ever-tighter corner. However, this means that civilians are increasingly exposed to risks, and there is growing disquiet on their behalf among official and non-official agencies in many different parts of the world. Arrangements to move them out of harm's way have been inadequate, as have been the relief efforts for the growing number of refugees. The state authorities blame the LTTE for using civilians as a human shield against the advancing military forces. Reports from the war zone are confusing but the refugee problem now claims priority and colours external perceptions of the situation.

And then there are the events in Pakistan, which are the biggest current concern. The ding-dong struggle between President Zardari and his challenger Mr. Nawaz Sharif remains undecided. What is evident, however, is that political uncertainty at the top has taken a toll on the government. Frequent changes of course, differences within the ruling party, ministerial resignations, opposition on the streets, frequent terror attacks, media scepticism, all have combined to affect the credibility of the government. It has been obliged to give way to fundamentalist groups who are now effectively lodged in several parts of the country.

The army is believed to have become more assertive, albeit behind the scenes. Pressures from outside are a further complication, especially those coming



The Lankan Tamil crisis yet to be resolved.

from the USA, which wishes to see a more active Pakistani role against the Taliban in Afghanistan. To add to it, there is the unyielding Indian demand for effective action against the perpetrators of the Mumbai attacks.

It is a tense and difficult time where the finer points of democracy and parliamentary practice seem almost irrelevant. India cannot but be concerned at developments that seem to point to a systemic challenge to the state, with incalculable consequences for the region as a whole.

While these events are taking place all around it, India is preoccupied with the general elections that are now absorbing more and more of its energies. No fresh initiatives of any great consequence are to

be expected until after the elections are concluded and a new government is in position.

The multiple challenges to regional diplomacy must remain unaddressed until then, there is no sign that the leading contenders for authority are fashioning initiatives for the future. Yet the deterioration all around us calls for carefully moderated policies towards all the regional partners to revive cooperation and underwrite stability. The country's security over the longer term requires no less, and this is a challenge for whichever government emerges from the coming elections.

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