

Measures against deviant buildings

So much more needs to be done

IT is welcome news that Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (Rajuk) has decided to sever utility connections to buildings that have flouted Rajuk approved designs. Frankly speaking, this serious aberration has been going on with full impunity since the creation of Bangladesh. And we observe with some degree of despondency that since most violators of building acts are influential people in society including a few lawmakers, they managed to go scot-free.

An impression is well-formed in the public mind that a bit of underhand dealings with some corrupt Rajuk officials would make the latter look the other way. All this must change now.

We note with considerable disquiet that absence of required car parking spaces in front of all buildings and high-rises is the foremost of deviations from the approved designs. Furthermore, most of the building owners have converted the parking space into shops, which is only exacerbating traffic congestions.

In its latest drive, Rajuk has already identified over two thousand deviant buildings in the city and has decided to demolish the altered portions after notifying the owners in keeping with the guidelines of the existing building act. The authorities reportedly have taken action in only one or two cases of violation and it intends to continue doing so.

No wonder, Rajuk was overwhelmed by the extent of deviation from the original designs and had no option left but to go for stringent measure. Number 29 of the Metropolitan Building Rules-2008 provides for such action and we understand agencies like Desa, Wasa and Titas have been given instructions to snap electricity, water, and gas supply lines to the deviant buildings already identified.

We regard this as a litmus test for Rajuk to go through the procedure conclusively without any compromise whatsoever. We must say the steps should have been taken long ago but it is better late than never. We hope, after a thorough investigation the full list of the violators would be made public and the laws would be implemented without any let-up. Let Rajuk bear in mind that rules and regulations are just as good as their implementation.

US' olive branch to Iran

Opportunity to better relationship

THE US president's overture to Iran on the eve of the Persian New Year Nowruz, is a significant departure from his predecessor's policy that never lost a chance to refer to Iran as a part of the axis of evil. We welcome the change of attitude of an establishment that had looked at Iran and indeed much of the Middle East and the Muslim world with a blinkered vision. Mr. Obama should be congratulated for taking the first step, as he had promised in his campaign he would, seeking engagement with Iran that was "honest and based on mutual respect".

We understand that the move will not endear him to Israel and most certainly the pro-Israeli lobby in the US will be sorely looking at the olive branch offered to Iran.

We would like to see the effort on the part of the US to shed the baggage of history insofar as its relationship with a country, that has been a part of one of the oldest civilizations of the world, after nearly thirty years of hiatus, lead to a positive outcome on a reciprocal basis. It should help lay the foundation of an era of new relationship between US and Iran.

But several things need to be sorted out before concrete developments become visible. What one would like to see are the openings, and how they will be exploited, defined clearly. Although it might appear that Obama's offer is unconditional, there may be conditions, not articulated but implied, in the very formulation of the US offer.

To build on the offer we feel that the first step for both the countries should be to create an environment of trust by appreciating and acknowledging the real compulsions of each other.

The US must appreciate the very sensitive position that Iran is now in. It continues to suffer from the fear of encirclement, with Israel, the greatest threat to the region in close proximity, and the very physical presence in military terms, of its arch-enemy the US, right in the territory of its neighbour Iraq. Iran has the right to defend itself as much as any other country, and to that end it has the right to undertake measures that ensure its security.

As for Iran it must act transparently while seeking to arm itself and must do everything to remove the perception among its rivals that its nuclear programme is indeed for peaceful purposes.

Facing the recession

We suggest that the industries be taken case by case and examined whether, to what extent, and in which layer of the production and marketing process the assistance is needed.

ABDUL BAYES

THE government seems to be alert to face the ripples of the worldwide economic recession. It has already commissioned a National Task Force comprising ministers, eminent economists, politicians, and businessmen. Hopefully, the task force would review the situation, time to time, and suggest some policy prescriptions.

That the impacts of an economic recession outside have fallen on us is quite evident from the reported drop in export earnings and remittances. Some RMG industries have reported that their overseas orders have come down by 30-40 percent.

Admittedly, these indicators depict an upward trend in the face of economic boom in foreign countries, and the reverse, in the case of a recession. In a globalised regime, it is quite likely that the impacts are transmitted very fast to produce a panic.

However, the next three to four months could be crucial to arrive at a more accurate picture of things to come. But assuming that an all-time deep world recession is to affect Bangladesh, the doable need to be determined from now on so that the rot is minimised.

Let us start with some silver linings arising from recession. The recession has seemingly sounded a note of comfort in the areas of investments in technological upgradation and diversifying investment portfolios.

New equipment at cheaper prices could be sourced in to reduce costs of production and thus maintain competitive edge. Likewise, a fall in energy and commodity prices could be a blessing in terms of gear-

ing up economic growth and consumption of essential items.

But that too depends on the "pass through" effects to be ensured via proper monitoring and guidance from the government. The economic recession should also teach us the lesson that our facilities pertaining to ports, customs, electricity, bureaucracy, interest rates, etc be fine-tuned to become more competitive and access overseas markets.

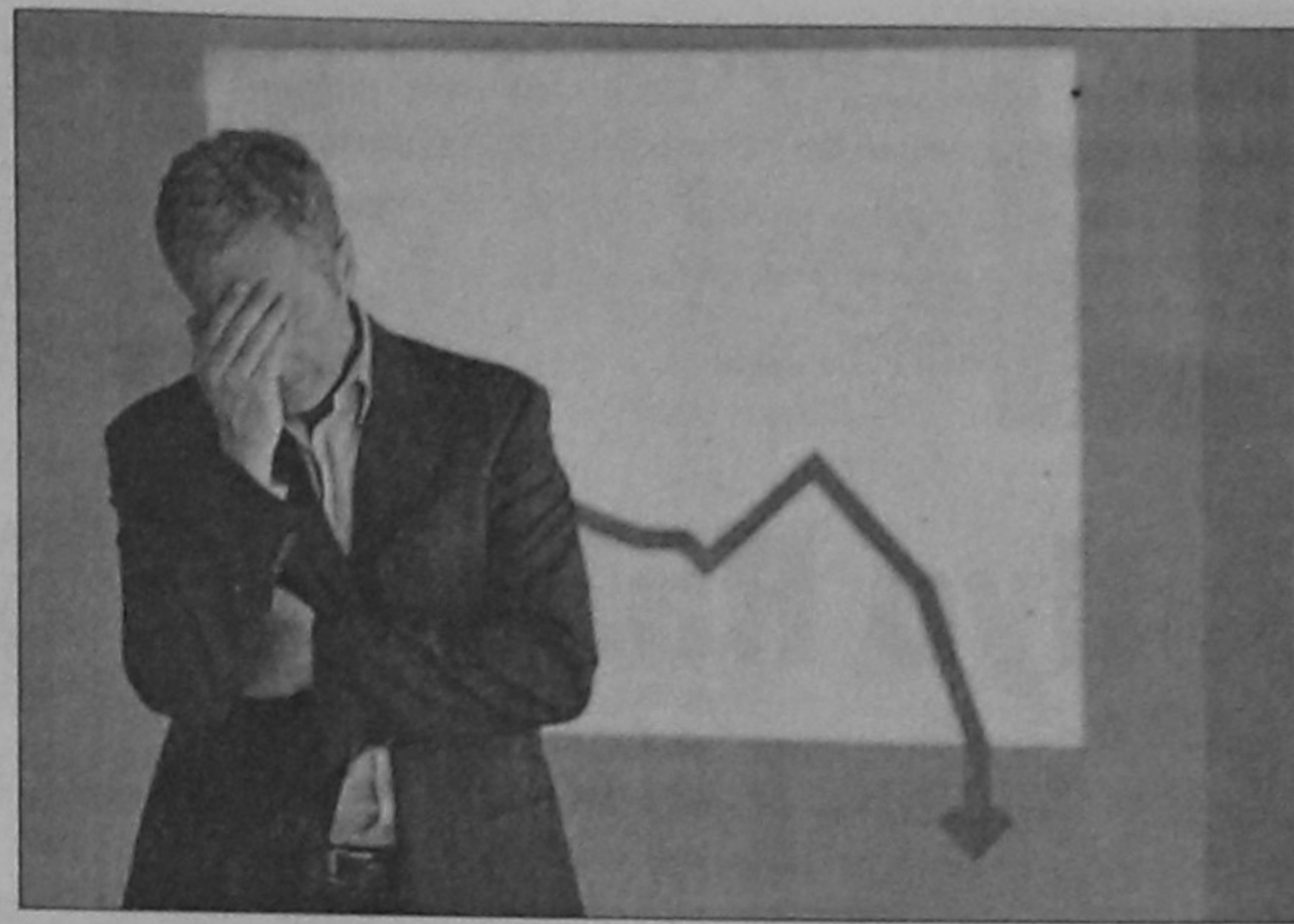
More important, perhaps, is the lesson that an aggressive economic diplomacy needs to be pursued for export diversification.

Meantime, business barons have already approached the government for a bail-out package, especially, pointing to the creation of a Tk.6,000 crore "rescue fund." There is likely to be a pressure group that would take advantage of the situation and capitalise on government's concerns and commitments.

Creating a fund before the onslaught would amount to provisioning the medicine before the sickness. Rather, we suggest that the industries be taken case by case and examined whether, to what extent, and in which layer of the production and marketing process the assistance is needed.

If a cash subsidy of certain percentage is called for, the onus lies to look at whether it should be across the board or for particular item/industry. The role of the banks in the whole game needs to be assessed, too.

We should not forget the fact that worldwide economic recession means that our external sector has somehow, for a short or long period, become subdued. A two-pronged attack should be marshaled in this case.



Falling off the charts.

First, address the external sector with an assistance package and economic diplomacy, and second, strengthen the internal sector with renewed interest. Quite obviously, the second element points to the perilous agricultural and rural sector as well as the import substituting industrial sectors.

The growth rate in the agricultural sector needs to be raised with proper investments in infrastructure and technology, in research and extension and in modernising production and marketing processes.

As far as import substituting industries are concerned, there seems very little justification in allocating funds for sick industries at the moment. Till the recession is over or a downturn in recessionary spiral is in the offing, these industries should wait.

Rather, right at the moment, domestic constraints including interest and tariff

structure that bedevil economic operations of these industries, should be given more attention than before.

The present government is already burdened with a barrage of commitments to the people as reflected in its election manifesto. With deepening of economic recession and clamour for more assistance from different corners, domestic disturbances, the task of resource management is a big challenge.

The bottom line is that the government needs to come up with a new charter of economic governance, rolling back wasteful expenditures on the back burner and putting productive investments up front to minimise the impact of recession. This is an acid test for the government and our eminent economists should be well equipped to help.

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Mutineers proved themselves wrong

Their projection of demands was a façade, and their objective different from the "demands." Their hidden design cannot elude even a lay mind, let alone an expert's. Even plane hijackers do not kill the hostages before failing to negotiate a deal. In this case, the killers killed first and then carried out mock negotiations.

MD. ALI AKBAR

HEART-rending facts emerged from the maze of the BDR carnage. We were shocked at the horrific trail of death and destruction. It was as if ghastly scenes of a horror film were unfolding on the screen. Our eyes were wide open to the exposes of bloody criminality. We were stunned at the unbelievable ferocity and scale of the barbarism.

By all indications, the brutal massacre appeared pre-planned, and executed with extraordinary secrecy, cunning and precision to which there was no answer. What evil ingenuity! The perpetrators' make-believe trickery made the incident look like a mutiny for the redressing of their demands.

Until the arms surrender, the people mistook it for a protest of sorts. Befooled first, and then, faced with the most unimaginable brutality, they were

numbed, dumbfounded. Everybody kept wondering how the killers could keep their nerves ice-cool throughout after having committed mayhem. It defies our comprehension, and beats any stretch of imagination.

Craftily, the killers hid their cruelty, but the hideous brutalities were unveiled in the end. By then it was too late. Before that, it did not cross anybody's mind that a disciplined force, as BDR always was, could have ever become so frenzied, so audacious as to shoot down their officers, en masse, and that, too, without giving a deadline for meeting their demands.

Their projection of demands was a façade, and their objective different from the "demands." Their hidden design cannot elude even a lay mind, let alone an expert's. Even plane hijackers do not kill the hostages before failing to negotiate a deal. In this case, the killers killed first and then carried out mock negotiations.

They murdered in cold-blooded. We came to know about their brutalities only after everything was over. Nothing but trauma, shock, and grief remained. A sinister design appears to have worked behind the orgy of murder.

Yes, the murderers knew full well that it was not in their officers' powers to fulfill the demands for incremental pay and perks and privileges, and that taking the latter's lives would only negate the propriety of demands rather than help fulfill them. They betrayed with what they claimed they stood for. They marred the glorious heritage of BDR and brought shame to it. Theirs was misnomer of a "mutiny" and they proved to be killers, not mutineers.

It cannot be that they did not realise that the killings would spell doom for them. They killed knowing full well their fate. Had it been for redressing of demands, they would have taken the officers captive. They indeed proved their point wrong by resorting to killing, loot, arson, and torture.

The tragedy has raised a few questions. Was not the blaming of army officers a ploy to tarnish the army's image? While the rebels were inside the compound until arms surrender, who printed and spread leaflets outside, reading "BDR-janata brotherhood live long," and "Fight together against the army"? Who shouted the slogan "BDR-janata-bhai-bhai"? Does it not point to some invisible hands in the carnage?

On whose advice was the midnight

surrender bid stalled, and who might have controlled the proceedings from afar? Another mystery is the overnight power blackout. Did it not facilitate the dumping of dead bodies in mass graves and sewage gutters, and their fleeing under cover of darkness?

The mutilating and disposing of dead bodies reminded us of the heartless dumping of the murdered Bengalis during the liberation war. Are not the 1971 barbarities revisiting us a telltale sign of a deep-rooted conspiracy? Has not our focus shifted overnight from the war crimes issue? We hope the probe bodies will get to the bottom without being impeded or distracted.

If all this together exposes the vulnerability of our national security, as many think it does, we must fix it to avert repeat cataclysms in future. Both civil and military analysts agree that it was a naked attack on our national security and sovereignty. It was staged at a time when the BDR command structure could be decimated.

To them, the deeper objective was to draw the army into a reactive, frontal battle with the BDR rebels, which would have destabilised the political situation. Doubtless, it was the new government's baptism of fire. Thank God, that has been overcome by the utmost restraint of the army and the political astuteness of the prime minister.

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Sharing water, sharing opportunities

The current groundwater extraction exceeds the recharge rate, causing the groundwater to be mined systematically and be depleted. By 2015, the city's population may exceed 20 million with a daily demand of about 3.2 billion litres!

SHAMIM AHMED

INTERNATIONAL World Water Day is observed on March 22 each year to underscore the importance of freshwater and advocate for the sustainable management of freshwater resources. This year, the focus of World Water Day will be on trans-boundary waters: sharing water, sharing opportunities.

About 70% of the earth's surface is water, but only 2.5% of it is freshwater, the rest being saline. Only 0.26% of all freshwater stock is globally available to us for use, but the quantity is quite enough for a world population of 6.4 billion.

The world's 263 trans-boundary lakes and river basins include the territory of 145 countries covering nearly half of the Earth's land surface. Due to unequal distribution of water resources and seasonal fluctuations in its availability, many countries are chronically water-stressed, while countries like Bangladesh suffer from severe seasonal variations in water supply.

Water crisis in Bangladesh is also largely due to the unavailability of trans-border water from India. Bangladesh, being the lower-most riparian country of the three

international river basins viz. the Ganges, the Brahmaputra, and the Meghna, receives about 85% of the water every year. It receives about six times the required water during monsoon, while facing severe scarcity of water during dry season, receiving less than half of the requirement.

These two extreme conditions are major impediments in the development activities of the country. The country has been negotiating mainly with India as co-riparian for harnessing, developing, and sharing trans-boundary river water for equitable distribution. Over the years, sharing trans-boundary river water has been a major cause of dispute between India and Bangladesh.

The most successful achievement of the Joint River Commission negotiation was the treaty signed between the two countries on sharing the Ganges water at Farakka in 1996. The agreement is a classic example of proper diplomatic efforts between two neighbouring countries, and this model should be followed to settle existing disputes on sharing water of Teesta and six other common rivers: Dharla, Dudhkumar, Monu, Khowai, Gomoti and Muhuri.

However, sharing internal water is also a crucial issue for overall socio-economic development. Much ground water, which had been the best source of safe drinking water, is contaminated with arsenic.

Salinity intrusion in the southwest is rendering groundwater unfit for consumption. Excessive withdrawal of groundwater for irrigation has also lowered the water table in many areas below the suction limit for withdrawing water through hand tubewells.

In fact, approximately 95% of the groundwater extracted is for irrigation, mainly for boro rice production and only 5% is used for domestic purposes. An imbalance exists in the usage of freshwater in urban and rural areas. The average per capita water use in Dhaka is around 160 litres whereas the amount hardly crosses 20 litres per day in rural areas.

With an estimated current population of over 12 million, and a daily average per capita demand of 160 litres, the city needs about 2 billion litres of water per day. Dhaka Wasa is unable to provide more than 80% of this requirement.

Moreover, the current groundwater extraction exceeds the recharge rate, causing the groundwater to be mined systematically and be depleted. By 2015, the city's population may exceed 20 million with a daily demand of about 3.2 billion litres!

All this calls for an urgent need to alleviate the demand on the upper aquifers and explore more sustainable sources to augment the present water supply, which

implies a conjunctive use of groundwater and surface water in order to maintain the balance between demand and availability.

A systematic framework and sustainable mechanism needs to be developed so that a portion of the water extracted from the ground does not have to compete with other usage, rather be kept reserved for drinking purpose only.

Bangladesh certainly needs regular flow of water from 57 trans-boundary rivers with India in order to meet this urgent need. With the newly-elected government in place in Bangladesh, which historically has had a good relations with India, the issue is likely to be treated amicably by both the parties.

The government here should start planning arbitration strategy with the incoming Indian government based on strong data and evidence. They should also develop diplomatic channels to influence and convince India to share water. Mutual respect and understanding between these two governments can not only solve many issues but can also promote peace, security and sustainable economic growth.

To secure our water supply for the future, we have to concentrate on using surface water. We are hopeful that the current government will be able to fight against water poverty in Bangladesh in the near future.

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