

Unsafe mega malls

How prepared are we before another fire strikes?

It doesn't seem that enough is being done to prevent another Bansundhara as one can make out from reports appearing in this newspaper regarding the state of preparedness of at least 5 major shopping complexes in the capital, to prevent and fight fire adequately.

Admittedly, everyone since the big fire has become more aware of the hazards of fire in high-rise buildings, but whether or not the awareness has worked towards motivating the relevant persons to act promptly is quite another matter.

We do not know yet the damages in terms of money in the Basundhara fire, but one shudders to think what might have been had it not been a Friday and the corporate offices on the top floors empty. We are thus constrained to ask as to what specific steps have been taken after the Basundhara complex fire, to ensure on one hand that the chances of outbreak of fire in the many large malls in city, were reduced to the minimum and, on the other, that measures were in place to tackle fire so that it causes the least damage to life and property.

We notice with dismay that except for some perfunctory actions like a drill here and a drill there, which of course is an essential element of fire safety preparedness, little of substance has been initiated by the relevant authorities to head off fire across the board.

We understand that all the shortcomings cannot be made up overnight, but the moot point is, are the people in places of responsibility aware of the shortcomings, particularly those that have built mega shopping complexes without really bothering about public safety?

No doubt it is the government that must take the lead. The relevant departments must initiate an inspection drive to determine the status of the firefighting system of each of the high-rise buildings in the city. Reportedly, while many of these buildings do not have adequate firefighting arrangements, many of those that have installed the system do not have them in functioning conditions. In some cases either the fire alarms are out of order or the foam or gas dispensers empty or the date of refilling those has expired many months back. And what good will come of a most modern system if those that are assigned the task of using it are not trained to do so.

The matter brooks no delay. The government must ensure that appropriate measures are undertaken by all concerned, and failure to comply with the stipulations after a particular time must be dealt with severely.

BRTA in dire need of reform

TIB reports unravels depth of corruption and incompetence

A TIB study has led to some disturbing revelations regarding corruption and irregularities that the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) is now saddled with. The findings are highly relevant as the road transport sector is performing well below the desired level. Problems like traffic congestion in urban areas, environmental pollution caused by worn-out vehicles and an unusually high number of road accidents persist, year after year.

It is really disquieting to learn that 61 percent of the driving licenses were obtained without the driver having to go through any kind of test! No less worrying is the news that 54 percent of the drivers have licenses the validity of which has expired. We are further informed that bribing does the trick whenever the drivers fail to meet the legal requirements, and the amounts of money that they have to pay varies according to the nature and extent of the violation of rules.

Obviously, it is the people in general who have to bear the brunt of it all. There are thousands of vehicles in the streets which should have been scrapped long ago. Yet, the corrupt BRTA system keeps them going as fitness certificates can be obtained so easily. The result is pollution and a higher risk of accident. The situation of course becomes critical when these ramshackle vehicles are driven by drivers with fake or no license. So, corruption at the BRTA is making the roads extremely unsafe and is also contributing to environmental pollution.

Moreover, the owners of vehicles have to bribe the BRTA officials at almost every step while applying for route permits or any other necessary document. The situation does not improve once the vehicles start moving on the roads. Now, it is the turn of the traffic police to make the most out of accidents or any violation of rules. Bribing appears to be the panacea for whatever problem the vehicles face while operating.

The TIB has also pointed out some limitations of the BRTA officials who, according to the study, are overburdened. The policy makers should take note of it and decide making the changes that will help the BRTA attain the needed level of efficiency in both client service and regulation of motor vehicles.

Enforcement of traffic rules and ensuring discipline on the roads will ever remain an elusive goal if the BRTA continues to perform dismally. We hope the government will form a high-powered committee, as pledged by the communications minister, to get at the bottom of BRTA corruption and anomalies with a view to making it a modernised and competent road transport management agency.

Our own worst enemies

We hear things we do not want to hear. We see things we do not want to see. We know things we do not want to know. It is, therefore, no wonder everyone keeps whispering in everyone's ears that worse days are coming ... so be prepared.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

WHO needs outside invaders when we can be our own worst enemies? True, we do not need the Mongols or the Huns or the Vikings to land at our shores to obliterate us. We can do it ourselves. How, you ask? Well, our failures and our indecisiveness are always there to strengthen the hands of the enemy. And by God, we can become such good enemies of ourselves, and destroy our achievements with such precision and perfection that the world often looks at us with bewilderment.

And why shouldn't they? We have a track record of carrying out mindless acts of mass murders on a number of occasions. And, not surprisingly, the mystery remained either unsolved or partially solved. The whole lot of *deshi* and *bideshi* sleuths kept scratching their heads and then disappeared out of sheer frustration. Exaggeration? Go, and read the files on many incidents of bomb blasts and killings -- Jessore Udichi bombing, Ramna Batamul bombing, Mymensingh cinema halls bombing, August 21 grenade attack at Bangabandhu Avenue, Sylhet grenade attack on Mr. Kibria and the UK High Commissioner Mr. Anwar.

After 1971, we have turned into a nation of guessers. In 1971, we did not have to guess. We knew who our enemies were and we also knew what to do with them. But since December 16, we have been faltering again and again in identifying our friends and our enemies. Often we have turned our face from our genuine friends, but

again, hugged sworn enemies. And today, we are paying the price for this.

Today, amnesia has gotten hold of the entire nation. Maybe, we have been affected by the "Whodunit" virus. The afflicted ones keep on wondering -- whodunit? Right at the moment we are wondering what is wrong with us? What is going on actually? Who is in charge and who is in control? What forces are out there, hell-bent on destroying the country from within? These are unpleasant thoughts but these keep coming back because of the things happening in various sectors.

The sector called politics is perhaps at its lowest ebb in Bangladesh at the moment. Most of our socio-economic ills have been created by negative politics and cutthroat politicians. Sorry brothers, but it is the truth. Can't blame you, really. Politics perhaps has taken more lives across the world than nature or animals. Don't forget that wars were and still are created by politicians.

Many historians believe that the Second World War continued for five years because of Churchill's ego, not Hitler's madness. The dropping of atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a political decision, not a military strategy. And if Bhutto had agreed to let Sheikh Mujibur Rahman become the prime minister of Pakistan then there would have been no genocide in East Pakistan, though Bangladesh would have emerged eventually.

So, it was bad politics that resulted in the deaths of 3 million people for the creation



The enemy within?

of Bangladesh. But, bloodshed has not stopped a bit in this country. It is not invaders but we who play the central part in the murder plots, either for our own interest or for the interest of our foreign masters. Here money plays a vital role as well. There are extremists in our midst, who would kill in the name of religion, and money. There are crooked politicians in our midst, who would kill in the name of politics, and money. Therefore, the combination turns lethal and unholy when we fail to break their backbone early on.

But, why have we failed? Are these people omnipotent ... unassailable ... invincible ... are these people unstoppable? Are they more powerful than the entire state machinery? Are they above the laws of the land? If not, then why can't we do away with them for good? How many of them are there? What is the number of the masterminds ... two hundred ... five hundred ... one thousand ...? Why do we allow one

thousand masterminds to stand up against 15 crore people?

To say the least, we are passing through rather very dangerous times. We hear things we do not want to hear. We see things we do not want to see. We know things we do not want to know. It is, therefore, no wonder everyone keeps whispering in everyone's ears that worse days are coming ... so be prepared ... you have not seen the end of misery and bloodbath ... send your children abroad ... go yourself ... this is not a safe country anymore ... this is not a liveable country anymore, and so on.

But, why? Why must they utter such terrible words? Why must fear haunt us every step? Why shall we have to leave the country? Alas! There is none to give us an answer. This overwhelming silence is scarier than any answer whatsoever.

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Don't take the Indian voters' silence lightly

The sphinx-like stolidity of the voter can be unnerving, particularly to a candidate who has lived largely in an urban drawing room. The immature can be so easily induced into hysteria; decade when they seek support by demonising Muslims.

M.J. AKBAR

WE confuse elections with noise. In truth, a great silence descends upon India the moment the Election Commission rings the starting bell. Media amplifies the jangling nerves of a candidate into a scream, but how do you cover the silence of the voter?

The anonymity of the opinion poll is one method. But the Indian electorate has now become the most secretive in the world, and if he does not unlock his mind all the figures that emerge from surveys add up to no better than guesswork or, at best, a rough direction-suggester.

John Kenneth Galbraith once suggested that the only purpose of economic forecasting was to make astrology look respectable. Some opinion polls make star-gazers seem prophetic. Perhaps, Jayalalitha knows what she is doing

when she asks aspirants for her party ticket to come armed with horoscopes. Those are probably a more accurate guide than opinion polls.

The sphinx-like stolidity of the voter can be unnerving, particularly to a candidate who has lived largely in an urban drawing room. The immature can be so easily induced into hysteria. The likes of Varun Gandhi miss an important development of the last decade when they seek support by demonising Muslims.

The Hindu voter has matured. He is now enthused by the prospect of a better life, a higher income and the promise of peace within which to enjoy that income. He has contempt for the politician who cannot understand what is so easily apparent to him; that you can either encourage the arsenic simmer of communal violence or you can enliven the throb of an expanding economy. You cannot have both.

This is not to say that we have eliminated aggression from our consciousness or our discourse. That would be self-delusional. Aggression comes particularly easily to the Indian elite, but it is equally wary of any blowback. It has, therefore, devised the strategy of passive aggression, exercising its sectarian or casteist prejudice in verbal assault, always taking care to ensure that the target is not within hearing distance.

The elitist anger against Mayawati has nothing to do with alleged corruption. If corruption was a social sin, in Delhi very few ministers would get invited for dinner. Mayawati's problem is that she is "not one of us." The prejudice of 10,000 years is not going to disappear after only 60 years of an egalitarian polity.

Mature politicians participate in the clamour of claims and repartee, which is the essential menu of a democratic diet. But they do their real calculations in silence. If you want to understand what Lalu Yadav really thinks of the Congress, ignore the verbiage of the accolades he may occasionally deliver in praise of Dr. Manmohan Singh and Mrs. Sonia Gandhi. Check what he did in silence. He and Ram Vilas Paswan allotted just three

seats out of 40 to Congress in Bihar. This was an assessment not by enemies but friends.

Mulayam Singh Yadav does not really believe Congress deserves more than six seats out of 80 in UP. Mamata Banerjee had one seat out of Bengal's 42 in the present Lok Sabha; the Congress had five. She sent the ultimatum in the new alliance and the Congress crumpled. Deve Gowda did not even bother to open negotiations in Karnataka.

Such dismissive treatment is not exclusive to the Congress. Naveen Patnaik did not think the BJP deserved an alliance in Orissa. Where regional parties see value they change their attitude; in Assam, Bihar, Haryana and Punjab for the BJP; in Tamil Nadu and Jharkhand for the Congress.

Never confuse the Indian voters temporary *maun vrat* with the silence of the lambs. This is the silence of tigers, as they pad noiselessly towards their quarry, shattering the air of the jungle only once, with a roar with the final leap towards the prey. When tigers feed only once in five years, the casualty rate can be terrifying.

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Speeding up the administration

Due to relative lack of experience and weakness in coordination the new government is facing some administrative problems. This needs careful handling of the bureaucracy as far as possible, until the new cabinet members become more conversant with policies and their implementation.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

THE AL-led government has come to power with a lofty election manifesto, but it is facing hassles from the start. This is not surprising, because it has inherited the huge errors, omissions and poor governance of the 4-party rule and some commission of mistakes of an unrepresentative, unaccountable and semi-military caretaker government.

No doubt the AL chief has taken a risk in choosing some inexperienced (but reported to be clean and dynamic) members of parliament as ministers to bring dynamism and speed to attain her dream of "Digital Bangladesh."

Surely, we appreciate Sheikh Hasina's attempt to push Bangladesh from its present low rank to a midlevel country rank. She has wisely sought assistance and cooperation from the opposition. Unfortunately, she has not yet received it. Instead, criticism about some of her steps has started within two months of the formation of the new government. Neutrally speaking, it is not proper to

expect smooth running from a government that is facing crisis after crisis. However, better options may be available. Thus, we need not be frustrated. It is a common knowledge that more works mean more possibility of mistakes and less work means less possibility of mistakes.

Sheikh Hasina is dissatisfied with the speed of work of the government. The last caretaker government (2007-08) was also unhappy with the performance of the bureaucracy. After its initial period, the caretaker government had to accept the reality and worked with a bureaucracy more sympathetic toward BNP and Jamaat. It is said that its performance would have been better had there been a neutral bureaucracy.

The caretaker government had limited scope forward. It was not elected. It was unaccountable. It could think of only starting a work. It need not have bothered about the ultimate end of the projects. In the case of the AL-led government it is different. As an elected government it has not only to pick up right projects,

it also has to think and work rightly to finish as many as possible.

The AL regime of 1996-2001 was more occupied with reestablishing the AL ideology in a rather unfriendly environment. This time, the AL-led government aims at pushing Bangladesh to a great height within 5-10 years. To attain this the government needs rapid implementation of projects relating to critical needs of the people.

This needs, in turn, an efficient, loyal and committed bureaucracy. How to obtain such a bureaucracy is a big headache for the new government. It is clear that mere patchwork or some spectacular decisions cannot help in achieving it. A well thought out plan is necessary.

Due to relative lack of experience and weakness in coordination the new government is facing some administrative problems. This needs careful handling of the bureaucracy as far as possible, until the new cabinet members become more conversant with policies and their implementation.

It cannot be assumed that merely pressuring the secretaries of ministries/divisions will speed up the work. The presumption that pro-BNP or pro-Jamaat workers will not work properly under the AL regime is not based on strong grounds. When government servants are free to cast their votes they need not be discriminated against in matters of work.

We are shocked to learn that, without caring much about consequence, some politicians in the new government are seriously disturbing the administration. This has resulted in transfer of 4 additional inspectors general, 9 deputy inspectors general and 42 superintendents of police, transfer of an officer twice in month, and retention of some judicial officers in the executive etc.

It is true that we do not have adequate number of honest and efficient officers, but such officers must be utilised properly. It appears advisable for new government to distribute them, particularly in the field level. The police will have to be carefully handled so that they can effectively control the emergence of Islamic militants and the law and order situation. This needs patience and firmness.

Like other democracies, our elected representatives decide policy. As such, we need a large and expert permanent public service. The latter can be neutral servants of any government, because they will be concerned with devising the best way to reach the objectives determined by the people's representatives.

It appears to be advisable for the new government to get as much work as possible from the bureaucrats and, where necessary, place those under close examination. The government may be polite but firm with bureaucrats.

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