

Collapsing essential services

Why must agencies await PM's intervention to act?

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina has asked the water and electricity suppliers to act quickly and alleviate the sufferings of the city dwellers brought on by chronic scarcity of water and unbearable power failures. The prime minister's directive should have come much earlier. What we feel though, is that smooth delivery of the essential services should never wait for her directives, the PDB and Wasa managers were expected to act out of their own sense of duty and responsibility towards the people.

The already precarious water supply situation in the city is worsening further, as complaints from residents continue to pile up. But scarcity alone is not the problem here. Residents of some areas are reportedly being forced to pay five times the normal price of a lorry of Wasa water. And they have also complained of being threatened with untoward consequences if they raise any question about the exorbitant price! The situation is grim in many other localities as queues for collecting water keep on lengthening.

And, of course, water supplied by Wasa is often found to be unfit for human consumption. And this may have a lot to do with the outbreak of water-borne diseases in the city on a massive scale.

There may be many constraints which make it difficult for the utility service providers to meet the demand of an ever sprawling metropolis. Nevertheless, coordination between the utility agencies can always help improve their performance. As Wasa is dependent on the PDB for supply of electricity, the poor performance of the power sector is affecting water supply system. There should be much better coordination between the two agencies, so that Wasa gets the amount of electricity needed to run the pumps that cannot be operated with the installed capacity of its own generators. But the two organisations have so far failed to attain the desired level of coordination.

The PM's directives should prompt the service providers to formulate an action plan to steer the city out of the present mess, both in the short term and the longer run. However, resource constraints coupled with technical limitations of the existing systems need to be taken into account by the decision makers. In order to find durable solutions to all such problems, long term need-based planning is necessary. At the same time, the agencies should have a crisis management action plan that they must be ready to implement on a short notice.

Industrial police force - a good idea

Should not be an instrument to coerce workers

THE government's move to have a separate force for maintaining peace in the industrial units is to be welcomed. It is understood that the said force would be in place in the next three months. Regrettably, our RMG sector has been susceptible to violence and vandalism both because of localised grievances as well as allegedly external manipulation.

We had witnessed with horror in the recent past the brazen and senseless destruction of many garment factories; several factories located inside the EPZs were also subjected to vandalism.

In most cases the situation had gone out of hand primarily due to the fact that the law enforcing agencies did not, or could not act timely or adequately. This was either because of the stand-off distance of the force from the place of occurrence or because there was not enough force to quell the mob. One would hope that such a force would be deployed at nodal points so that they can respond to a situation quickly.

We would like to suggest that the relevant authorities make a case study of all recent instances of disturbances and vandalism in the garment sector. There is need to know why in certain cases unrest in one factory spread so quickly and involved so many others, not only in its close vicinity, but also in many that were far off from where the disturbance initially occurred. There is need to have a well trained surveillance team for these units to warn of any impending situation.

No doubt industries, particularly those oriented towards export, can hardly afford to have their work schedule hampered because of workers' unrest, and everything must be done to ensure that the environment in the RMG units is peaceful. However, one must caution against such a force becoming a coercive instrument and a handmaiden of the owners to suppress workers' grievances.

We feel that while a police force with a quick reflex is the last resort for the physical protection of any establishment the only thing, which can ensure that a precipitate situation did not come about in the first place, is a good owner-worker relationship predicated on the management's sympathetic attitude towards the genuine needs of the workers. Peace and discipline in an industrial unit are not a function of force but of good management.

Worthless sons, worthy examples

When sons of worthy fathers turn worthless, people tend to blame the mothers in most cases. There may be some truth in it. When fathers remain busy creating history, it is the mothers who should groom their sons and guide them to follow the footsteps of the worthy fathers. No mother can be proud of unworthy sons.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

TODAY is the day of telling stories. Such stories are kinds that set you a-thinking, as they have substance worth pondering. These are stories of people involved in power and power-play, and in intrigues and ingenuity, that is all about the strange rendezvous called politics. So let us indulge ourselves a little in this hot and humid weather. We begin humbly with a preamble.

Traditionally, sons of the emperors and kings sit on the throne when they become worthy of it. They groom themselves up with education, knowledge and skill to become worthy of the throne. But, not necessarily such coronations always take place in a peaceful manner. History tells us, many unworthy sons did not hesitate to banish or kill their fathers to claim the royal sceptre. To commemorate their contribution there is an oft-used phrase: Unworthy son of a worthy father - in the English lexicon.

In Bangladesh, there are many such unworthy sons who have created a dark niche for them in our history. Whatever worthy their fathers did through hard work, those sons obligingly undid it all within years. We know the story of this particular worthless son of a famous person in this country. This son became a prince from a pauper. His lust for power and wealth grew to legendary

proportion. This pauper-turned-prince in his heydays built a separate abode for himself and named it the Windy Castle.

He loved to be surrounded by a motley band of looters and schemers and had the habit of summoning ministers at odd hours to carry out his orders. He ran a parallel administration thereby interfering in government activities. Even senior civil and police officials ran behind his car when the prince went on visits outside the capital. Party men built a thousand *torones* (gates) on one-kilometre road to win his heart. The prince was preparing himself to sit on the throne one fine morning. Though the people didn't want him, yet the party men were all set to arrange the most expensive and lavish coronation the world has ever seen. Today, we do not even remember his name...

Then there is the story of a worthy son of a worthy father who lives in a nearby country named India. His name is Rahul Gandhi. Many people admire this young man who has studied abroad and who never rides expensive cars or make civil, police officials run behind his car.

He often makes his way to remote villages to live with the simple village folks and learn about their life. He never takes bodyguards or secretaries or *chamchas* with him to provide entertainment while on such unscheduled visits. When he goes abroad, he never carries more than one suitcase. And his



mother does not even own a car!

Recently, Rahul Gandhi surprised all by saying that he was not ready to be the prime minister of India. He gave two reasons why he could not accept the post. "One is that I am working in the organisation of the Congress party, which I think is fundamental for this country. I think it is very important that a strong, progressive, pro-poor youth organisation is developed in this country and that is a very, very big priority of mine. Number two is I don't think I have the experience to be the prime minister of the country right now." By golly! Ask our prince whether he would want to be the prime minister of Bangladesh!

I would like to end this story-telling morning with an interesting anecdote. This is a real-life incident involving another son and a father. The Rockefeller family in the US is known for many things, especially for the great wealth it earned from business. It all

began with John D. Rockefeller (1839-1937). So, the story goes like this. One day John D. Rockefeller lunched at a posh New York restaurant and gave 10 dollar as tips to the waiter. The waiter smiled and said, "Sir, your son always gives 50 dollar." At this, John D. Rockefeller said, "Young man, he is the son of Rockefeller, but I am not." Well, that speaks a lot about how sons often treat the hard earned wealth of their fathers, doesn't it?

When sons of worthy fathers turn worthless, people tend to blame the mothers in most cases. There may be some truth in it. When fathers remain busy creating history, it is the mothers who should groom their sons and guide them to follow the footsteps of the worthy fathers. No mother can be proud of unworthy sons.

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Nor any drop to drink

True, the grave situation is not the making of this government. It is the outcome of rampant corruption, gross negligence and lack of planning on the part of the governments that were in power before. It is now the responsibility of the incumbent government to address the issue.

HUSAIN IMAM

THE residents of Dhaka city are in dire straits because of water shortage. In many areas, people have to go without water for days together. To add fuel to the fire, the weather has been persistently dry and sultry and the residents have to go without electricity every alternate hour of the day.

Last night we saw the residents of some of the worst hit areas of the city telling a television crew about their untold sufferings because of water crisis. The little water they get through Wasa pipelines is not fit for human consumption because of serious contamination.

Some housewives told the television crew that they could do without electricity but not without water. They were damn right. Nobody can think of life without water. The government had better listen to these people with all the urgency and do something on a war footing to mitigate their sufferings, unless they want to see a repetition of

similar or more fearsome incidents than Kansat and Shanir Akhra.

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We cannot but feel pity for the chairman of Wasa when we see him trying to pass the buck to the PDB for their (PDB's) inability to ensure regular supply of electricity to run the pumps. Sorry sir, the people aren't convinced. That the city is running short of electricity is not a new phenomenon. It has only worsened with time.

Why could Wasa not arrange for generators of their own to run the pumps? What answer does the chairman have to the complaint that people cannot get a water tank lorry in their areas unless they pay extra money to the staff, which is sometimes four to five times more

than the actual price? Does he have any answer to the report published in a national daily that, taking advantage of the situation, a huge quantity of diesel meant for running the generators is being pilfered by an organised syndicate in collusion with some corrupt employees of Wasa?

It's good to see that the members of parliament elected from the city constituencies have stood by the side of the residents. They have sat with the mayor of the city and discussed the issue at length and are trying to do something to alleviate the sufferings of the people. This is exactly what we expect from our elected representatives. My humble suggestions to them as well as to the government would be:

- Organise vigilance teams headed by local MPs in the worst hit areas to supervise running of the pumps installed there, to stop pilferage of diesel, to reduce system loss and also to distribute water till the situation improves.
- Install water-purifying equipment at sites temporarily. If need be, take help of the armed forces. The government might consider asking for help of US marines in this regard. We have seen them distilling seawater and supply drinking water to the cyclone hit people of the coastal areas
- Supply adequate number of generators on emergency basis to run the

pumps during load shedding, and undertake a comprehensive plan to repair or replace the existing pumps, generators and pipelines.

- Complete the second phase of Sayedabad water purifying plant as early as possible.
- Restore the lakes, ponds and canals of the city, and build a number of water reservoirs in and around the city to collect rainwater during the rainy season.
- Buringanga, Dhaleshawri, Sitalakhya and Turag are lifelines for the people of Dhaka. Save them from pollution at any cost. Otherwise, the days are not far off when we have to say, "water, water, every where, nor any drop to drink."
- Constitute a task force of experts, if need be hiring one or two experts from abroad, to take stock of the whole situation and advise our planners and policy makers to adopt means to overcome the situation on short-term, mid-term and long term basis.
- Corruption in Wasa is believed to be one of the main causes for this sad state of affairs. Why don't the Anti-corruption Commission and the parliamentary standing committee see to what extent they can dig out and eradicate the malaise from this organisation?

Capt. Husain Imam is a retired merchant navy officer.

Khaleda's house and eminent domain

My point is that Khaleda must be evicted from this property for a great cause; rehabilitating the widows and children of the slain army officers in the Pilkhana mayhem. If she wins the case in the High Court -- the parliament must pass a bill empowering the state to enforce what is known as "eminent domain" in the US.

ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

HOW can a political party survive when its leaders are organising a month long countrywide political agitation against a house eviction notice when there are so many issues -- dire water shortage, power shortage, and price spirals of many daily essentials -- crying out for attention?

It seems that BNP is shunning these issues because it is mostly culpable for ignoring them during their 5 years of ill governance. They neither have credibility with the masses, nor the strong backing of grass root activists. One thing they failed to cash in on was

the issue of MP's meddling in local government affairs, which BNP lawmakers supported. They can still join to energise the movement with the local government elected officials for repeal of the local government act. It's hard to understand why Khaleda Zia should be distressed about eviction from a controversial leased house. As a mother, shouldn't she be more concerned and preoccupied about her sons' health and well-being than steering a countrywide movement to prevent her eviction from a house that was purely a charity-lease arrangement.

The house may have numerous personal memories, as well as many memories of her assassinated husband, which

some BNP leaders argue is why she should continue living there. It would be wise of her to vacate the house honourably before being forcefully evicted in shame and disgrace.

The AL led government has the power to render Khaleda homeless -- I mean one less home -- even if she wins her day in court. It is true that she had the house duly registered, but what everybody should know is that she had duly registered an illegally allotted house.

My point is that Khaleda must be evicted from this property for a great cause; rehabilitating the widows and children of the slain army officers in the Pilkhana mayhem. If she wins the case in the High Court -- the parliament must pass a bill empowering the state to enforce what is known as "eminent domain" in the US.

Eminent domain embodies the power possessed by the state over all property within the boundary of the state to appropriate any property for a public cause. A public cause is virtually anything that is sanctioned by a legislative

body -- one that is sometimes called condemnation, taking or expropriation. In my judgment, Khaleda's eviction is a foregone conclusion. BNP must turn to real issues of the people if it wants to survive.

Recently, on Channel-1, a housewife narrated her miseries with contaminated city water supply. She used the same water to wash dal, vegetables, and then fish. That's a real issue BNP should try to help ameliorate, and propose a bill in the House. Khaleda's house is absolutely a non-issue for countrywide agitations and threats of boycotting the parliament.

In a democracy, when political parties lay out the problems the people wanted solved, debate and discourses in the parliament always result in quality outcome. Therefore, BNP politicians have little choice but to engage in issue oriented politics and movements both inside and outside the parliament.

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