

Dhaka's moribund rivers

A powerful "coordinating body" to protect rivers is urgently needed

THE message that has come out loud and clear from a roundtable organised by The Daily Star last Thursday on pollution of the rivers around Dhaka is that the four major rivers around the capital and its suburbs, which had for so long sustained it, are dying. The rivers are depleting not only in quantity but also in quality. And regrettably, it is the industrial units that must share the major responsibility for the present state.

This newspaper has been for long reporting on the condition of the rivers and other outlets ravaged by the effluence disgorged by mills and factories that have sprung up over the past few decades in and around the capital.

In our bid to industrialise we have paid little attention to the environment. One wonders what good progress will be if the disregard for nature and its endowments affects people's life adversely.

We are on one hand using the water of the rivers around the capital to live but at the same time constantly polluting these rivers. The most disturbing aspect is that along with the pollution of the rivers the groundwater level is also shrinking and the polluted water is percolating into the subsurface.

River pollution has now reached such a dangerous level that the question that we are faced with is not how to maintain the quality of life of the capital's population but the very real prospect of Dhaka becoming unfit for habitation if urgent action is not taken to address the matter.

The situation poses horrendous threat to public health. If water is the basic ingredient for good public health, we are confronted with a situation where water is just not available in consumable form since its content is such that it is not even fit for purification because of the very exorbitant cost of the operation. The forecast of an expert at the roundtable that in the near future there may not be safe enough water to bottle because of the amount of background pathogens should help put the matter in the right perspective.

The PM has taken up a plan for dredging of the important rivers. But mere dredging will not be enough. A holistic approach should be adopted in this regard. The major recommendations that came out of the roundtable discussion are very appropriate and should be noted, particularly that of setting up a river protection body invested with adequate power and scope to circumvent the bureaucratic impediments and take concrete actions to protect and clean up our rivers. This is an urgent necessity and the PM's personal attention is called for.

Railways in a shambles

Much better performance needed to set things right

BANGLADESH railways, performing well below the expectations of passengers for a long time, appear to be caught in a vicious cycle of mismanagement and poor supervision. A photograph published in this newspaper on Wednesday does show that even the safety factor, which gives the trains an edge over road transports, is being ignored by the railway managers. Obviously, when metallic clips that hold the rails to the sleepers are stolen, and yet the trains move along those tracks, the safety of passengers does not seem to figure prominently in the railways' operational plans. But that is exactly what has happened near the Mohakhali level crossing in the city. Locals complained that drug addicts have removed the clips. There may be truth in their observation, but what we find extremely difficult to comprehend is how could such matters go unnoticed? If the railway authorities cannot deal with some drug addicts how are they going to handle the organised groups of thieves and looters who are responsible for the present state of the railways?

Examples will make the point clear. At least 40 per cent of the land owned by the railways has already been grabbed by illegal occupants. And the same is true about its other assets as pilferage of rolling stocks could not yet be prevented. So, the poor performance of the railways is not without reasons.

As experts have suggested time and again, the railways need modernisation and better management. The railway authorities have tried to privatise certain functions and the move has been successful to some extent. But the basic conditions like passengers' safety, reasonably good services, maintenance of schedules etc have to be fulfilled if they want to keep themselves afloat in the face of stiff competition by road transports. Regrettably, the photograph of missing clips will not help attain their goal. Modernisation will of course take time, but the railway authorities have to give a better account of themselves right now, since such a huge number of people are still dependent on their service.

Are the railways up for the grab? Or will the railway authorities come forward and put an end to all kinds of corruption and outright theft and looting? These questions have become relevant in view of what we observe these days.

EDITORIAL

Overcoming the migrant worker meltdown

The current trend suggests that nearly 100,000 Bangladeshi migrant workers might return home by the end of 2009. It is also being mentioned by analysts monitoring the flow of migrant workers that there might be more than 30 percent reduction in intake this year compared to 2008.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

RECENT developments with regard to our migrant workers have persuaded me to write about this ongoing problem. We have seen the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister and other Ministers addressing this issue during their visits to different countries in the past few weeks.

The scenario has exacerbated because of the evolving global recession and its effect on economic development in general and the construction sector in particular. It is affecting opportunities in our traditional markets for migrant workers. We have already seen the cancellation of over 50,000 visas by Malaysia. Two Ministers of our government visited that country to persuade the relevant authorities to re-consider their decision. Positive results are however unlikely in this regard.

A recent report published in the Financial Express has indicated that nearly 22,000 Bangladeshi migrant workers have returned home in the first quarter of this year, majority of them from Dubai (where the construction boom has slowed down). Others have been retrenched and have returned home from Singapore.

Some of those coming back have also complained that they were forced to return because the local authorities refused to agree to their continued stay through the provision of 'transfer visa' (where another local company is willing to employ them on condition that transfer of work permit from the original employer is consented to by the relevant Ministry).

Time is of the essence. The World Bank has issued a warning in their semi-annual economic review of the Bangladesh economy of second-round effects of the global crisis -- both with regard to RMG exports as well as remittances received from abroad.

The current trend suggests that nearly 100,000 Bangladeshi migrant workers might return home by the end of 2009. It is also being mentioned by analysts monitoring the flow of migrant workers that there might be more than 30 percent reduction in intake this year compared to 2008. One can only hope that such dire predictions of a double whammy do not come to pass.

Migrant workers are vital for Bangladesh, its economy and also in providing considerable support to the meeting of its balance of payments needs. In fact, one economist has pointed out that, in this financial year, despite some slow-down, we are expecting remittances from our migrant workers to reach almost US dollar 9 billion (through formal channels). This works out to per capita support of about US dollar 60, or nearly Taka 4,100 for the Bangladesh econ-

omy. One could add to this figure at least another 10 percent due to remittances also received informally through the 'hundi' channel. This is a major amount and at least



Forced to return to their home countries empty-handed.

one and half times more than the net foreign exchange support gained from our RMG industry.

It is this significance that has persuaded Bangladesh Bank to request the Bangladeshi commercial banks to take effective measures to expedite the flow of inward remittances from different parts of the world including the Middle East, United Kingdom, Malaysia, Italy and Singapore. This has been a good step. It will facilitate transfer of funds and reduce informal inflow. Under shrinking market conditions, the role of the Private Commercial Banks (PCBs) and the state owned commercial banks (SCBs) would be critical in ensuring the steady inflow of inward remittances. There are various aspects to this growing crisis in the manpower sector.

The first relates not only to the increase in the number of unemployed within the country (through the return of workers) but also frustration among those already unemployed and unable to find employment of any description either at home or abroad. The second pertains to tens of thousands of families having to face financial disaster in

being unable to repay loans taken from informal sources to facilitate their family members going abroad. I fear that hundreds of thousands of families will now drop below the poverty line. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has forecast that 23 million may lose their jobs in Asia by the end of this year.

There is also another dimension within this complex matrix that needs to be reviewed. Our Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training only monitors the number of workers going abroad. Those returning do not necessarily report to them. Consequently, we do not have reliable data about the number or the background

and nursing (specially of the elderly). The objective of such training should be to produce at least 150,000 semi-skilled workers in the next one year.

We have already seen how indigenous talent has created the technical pool in Dholai Khal area in Dhaka and many other parts of our country. Let us try to replicate this process. The first step should be the creation of a statistical database of what we have, description of the skills available and also of the number who can be used to become trainee teachers. It will require political will, bi-partisan commitment and dedication. We will then have that many more chances of entry into the more com-

petitive market.

In the meantime, our diplomatic Missions in the Middle East, Malaysia and Singapore should also try to persuade the relevant authorities to agree to the dynamics of 'transfer visa'. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, through her initiative, has shown that it can be done. Saudi Arabia is an example. Our Embassies should also be more worker-friendly.

I note with regret that more than 600 young Bangladeshi migrant workers have died in the first quarter of this year, supposedly from heart attacks. Such a cause appears to be unlikely given that they were mostly between 25 and 35. Something is going wrong and it is the duty of our diplomatic Missions to get their act together and safeguard the needs of our expatriate workers.

At the same time, they must ensure that these workers do not get involved in political acrimony or abuse local regulations and hospitality. We have a delicate and onerous task ahead. Any failure will be disastrous.

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The indefensible crossfire

The government of the day, however, is pledge-bound nationally and internationally to put a complete stop to such irregular and blatantly illegal practices. The worrying part is, how we have reached such a stage when the responsible people in the authority has, at least, implicitly admitted the use of illegal measures by state organs.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE ignominy of an intolerant and myopic establishment has not pained all citizens in equal measure and therefore, it is not unusual to find advocates and admirers of extra-judicial actions like the so-called 'crossfire' as part of our politics. In fact, in the not-too-distant past, doing away with the alleged criminal physically by resorting to the so-called 'crossfire' actions was a preferred option of the law-enforcement functionaries. Reportedly, such personnel are finding it difficult to control crime and disorder without generous use of the 'crossfire' medicine.

The above suspicion acquires significance when one hears the local government minister and chief spokesperson of the ruling Awami League saying that the law-enforcement forces can no longer be allowed to resort to 'crossfire' and extra-judicial killings as a control weapon. The minister adds very candidly that democracy has been re-established and in strengthening the rule of law in our democratic society, 'crossfire' and extra-judicial killing cannot be an enforcement tactic.

Newspaper reports indicate that during the last four months there have been some deaths in this manner. The government of the day, however, is pledge-bound nationally and internationally to put a complete stop to such irregular and blatantly illegal practices. The worrying part is, how we have reached such a stage when the responsible people in the authority has, at least, implicitly admitted the use of illegal measures by state organs. Equally impor-

tant would be to ensure lawful actions by the enforcement machinery.

It is not for the ordinary or naïve members of the public to take a deep look at extra-judicial killings because their concern is one of immediate relief from the depredations of the local bully or the entrenched tormentor. However, a civilised government cannot be a prisoner of such damaging retrograde thoughts. A very significant aspect, which demands serious attention, is that the so-called terrorists killed in the crossfire were in fact politically patronised. As a result, there is no guarantee that such killings will produce any result.

"Operation Clean Heart" also resulted in the extra-judicial killings of identified terrorists and criminals and that too happened after only one-year of assumption of power of a civil government. The law and order or crime situation did not register much of a change for the better. In fact, extra-judicial killings have not succeeded in controlling crime anywhere in any country. Crime and terrorism do not cross the bearable limit on its own. There are always cogent and credible factors behind such abnormalities. One needs to probe into those with the concern of a protector.

If, as a civilised nation, we expect our regulatory institutions including the police to regularly brush up their professional skills then we cannot be a party to facilitating the creation of a scenario wherein one would be willing to believe that those perpetrators of crime who cannot be brought under the law have to be dealt beyond the law. Needless to mention here that in such an assumption

lies the suicidal admission that the criminal justice administration of a democratic polity has failed to act and the state has forsaken one of its primary functions.

Since no right-thinking Bangladeshi would reconcile to such a scenario they have a duty to find out why some organs of the state have to resort to apparent vigilante action. The nation needs to know if law-enforcement personnel are deliberately deviating from the statutory directives in anti-crime operations.

Eulogising or praising the "crossfire actions" have created a worrying environment wherein result-oriented investigating officers are increasingly getting inclined to resort to short-cut methods to please the official bosses or the political masters. The worrisome part is the threat to put an alleged criminal or an ordinary suspect under the so-called "crossfire scenario" in order to gratify ulterior motives.

Since most crossfire deaths are not seriously pursued for establishing the suspected culpability, the culprits in the enforcement and investigative apparatus discover a macabre win-win situation in such patently illegal acts. Elements of accountability and fear recede into background and investigation by the book becomes a pathetically low priority. Professionally speaking, this is an instance of heightened jeopardy because in Bangladesh the crime fighting machinery already stands accused of not cultivating a scientific modus operandi and quite often relapsing into the untenable third-degree methods.

The question is, do we want sustained laborious action under the law to strengthen our democratic foundation or do we need rash desperate action without the cover of law? The crossfire actions, undoubtedly, do not fit in with the first proposition.

The ultimate punishment in the alleged "crossfire" appears as summary response from desperate executives of law enforcement. The legality of actions leading to such extreme action apart, any responsible citizen might like to know if in our often over-zealous anti-crime operations, we are just treating the symptoms without ventur-

ing to study and assess the objective conditions promoting criminality. We do not need sociologists and criminologists to tell us that present-day crime is a complex social phenomenon caused by a multiplicity of factors and determining culpability is an extremely mind-exacting task.

Our everyday life experience tells us that quite often the fun-seeking delinquent of yesteryears turn into uncontrollable don of the day due to the patronage of powerful quarters and the unexplained inaction of the enforcement outfit. Therefore, when deaths occur in the so-called "crossfire" some myopic elements may be satisfied but a civilised society which wishes to live by the cannons of law cannot but be concerned. The alleged deaths in "crossfire" are forestalling the benefits of thorough investigation wherefrom the citizens could have known the pathetic as yet compelling factors behind the growth and maturing of criminals, the shady role of the patrons and the alleged inertia of the regulatory units.

What we need is adequate provision of witness protection and victim support in the criminal justice administration. To make those effective we need large injection of governmental funds. Any further delay will only swell the ranks of summary-justice seekers and the admirers of vigilante action. The decapitating adversity of the victims of crime demand mainstream support of the system.

The crisis of our law and order situation has not sprouted overnight and as such the solution will not be instant. The creation of so-called composite elite force and the dubious desperado action indulged may succeed in temporarily keeping some terrorists on the run and the authorities may get some credit from unsuspecting public on this count but the real problem will remain in situ with root and branches. The residue of large-scale violations of human rights by the guardians would be a shameful and painful memory to live with. It is time to ensure an effective halt to this continuing dark episode of our enforcement operations.

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