

JS body's directive to save rivers welcome

Concrete action should follow now

WE are happy to note that the parliamentary standing committee on land ministry has directed the ministries of industry and environment to act with urgency to save the country's rivers, particularly the four that serve as the lifeline of the capital. One cannot stress enough the need for immediate measures in this regard since the decay of the rivers, especially around the capital, that sustain us, are occurring faster than we have bothered to react, to stem their demise.

We commend the standing committee on law ministry for its initiative and extend our whole-hearted support to it as it strikes a responsive chord in us. As a newspaper we have been pursuing the matter vigorously for a long time and only recently we brought out in this column the very deleterious consequences that we are likely to face in near future, if the issue is not tackled in right earnest.

Our rivers are suffering primarily on two counts.

They are being subjected to severe pollution, particularly the four that serve the capital, by unchecked effluence from the large numbers of industries that have come up on the banks of the rivers over the last few decades. This has made the river water, which is the prime source of the city's surface water supply, unfit for consumption, and a time may soon come when no amount of purification will render the water usable, let alone potable. This is so with most of the rivers in the country that pass through major conurbations. The prospect bodes very ill for us.

The other cause of demise of our rivers is the unauthorised occupation and filling up of the river banks that are causing the river channels to become constricted with the attendant consequences.

We feel that the time has come for very vigorous intervention by the government that must go beyond mere issuing of directives. While very pertinently, the ministries of industries and environment must be seized with the issue urgently, the other agencies must also be employed to stem the rot. There is a large corpus of laws and regulations that are neither implemented nor followed. Actions must be taken to implement these, and this must be done without delay.

We feel that without specific plans to first, stem the deterioration of the rivers and, secondly, reclaim the rivers from the illegal occupants, all the directives and talks to save our rivers will go in vain. One of our suggestions made recently, of setting up a river protection authority, which should be invested with adequate power and scope to circumvent the bureaucratic impediments and take concrete actions to save the dying rivers, bears repetition.

Reviving the jute sector

Bold policy support needed

THE government's plan to revitalise the jute industry which has been in a bad way for long has everything positive in it; for, jute can still play an important role in boosting the national economy.

To begin with, the government will make it mandatory for all public sector agencies to use jute sacks for packaging. It will substantially increase the use of jute products in the public sector. We believe the practice should already have been there, since jute is both eco-friendly and comparatively cheaper. But it appears that the use of synthetic goods worldwide influenced us also, despite Bangladesh being the leading jute producing zone for over a century. Jute has a clear edge over all its competitors when it comes to eco-friendliness, but we could neither plead its case, nor take advantage of its positive aspects.

The government is also going to announce a national jute policy in October, which will place a renewed emphasis on production of our once premier foreign exchange earner. The country's poor performance in the jute sector has been made amply clear by the 21 percent decline in export of jute and jute goods in recent times. Moreover, out of the 160 jute and jute spinning mills, around only 100 are operating normally. So the sector needs a big boost both in terms of policy support and fiscal incentives. The government's decision to raise the cash incentive from 7.5 percent to 10 percent is certainly a move in the right direction.

The non-availability of quality seeds has been identified as a problem. It has to be addressed with due urgency and efficiency to avoid cultivation of low quality jute. And, of course, many farmers, who have already discarded jute, need to be encouraged to grow it again as a cash crop.

The story of jute has been one of casualty by inept policymaking and poor management. The policy makers appear to have been oblivious of the fact that we had a big advantage over all other competitors as the biggest high quality jute producing country in the world. But it is a sad truth that when the industry was being streamlined in other countries, our decision makers were busy dismantling it locally.

Valuable time has been lost, but still a revamped jute industry can add value to our economy.

Spendthrift MPs ... everywhere!

Gordon Brown should come to Bangladesh and learn from our politicians how to do it and then defend such allegations. Learn to lie, right and left, man! You have to be bold about it. Take the skin off your eyes. Come to Bangladesh and have a look at those health, gardening and entertainment bills! Even your spendthrift MPs would be amazed.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

LONDON is upset! United Kingdom is flabbergasted! The world is stunned! One London newspaper headline screamed: "The mother of all democracies is embroiled in an escalating scandal over the misuse by members of Parliament of taxpayers' money to subsidize outrageous lifestyles and multiple homes."

Outrageous lifestyle, eh! Another newspaper wrote: "British MPs are paid an annual salary of around £63,300 (\$96,000). They also receive generous allowances for the costs of running an office, having homes both near Parliament and in their constituencies, and traveling between both."

It is this allowance system that has been widely exploited, wrote another. "In the past week, *The Daily Telegraph* newspaper has revealed a culture of corruption among MPs who have abused the system of parliamentary allowances to pay for an array of items from the bizarre to the absurd -- all funded by the taxpaying citizens of Britain. Reportedly, *The Telegraph's* investigation has led to around £100,000 being paid back to the taxpayers."

By golly! So, even they do it! Yes, it's not only our Sircas or Selwar, even the British MPs do it! They have learned the trick of siphoning money out of public exchequer to pay for pornographic movies and toilet seat, for growing flowers in private gardens, pay instalments for homes, maintain swimming

pools and housekeepers and also to dredge the moat in a country house! Now, what say old chap? Isn't that 'some' public service, spending public money? Hey, doesn't that somehow sound familiar to us? Where have we heard something similar to this?

Forget it. Now, let's listen to Gordon Brown, the British prime minister: "I want to apologise on behalf of politicians, on behalf of all parties, for what has happened in the events of these last few days. Parliamentarians have a responsibility to show that people who enter our profession are there to serve the public interest, and not to serve themselves." But, wait a second, dear prime minister. What about the allegations against you? One report says you had abused the system by paying your brother £6000 for arranging cleaning services for his private home. Blistering barnacles!

Interestingly enough, three senior Tory MPs who had claimed swimming pool maintenance costs, have agreed to repay the money. Some other MPs have also said they would return the money. Ah! Should we tell this to our Sircas and Selwar? Shouldn't they pay back millions they have stashed away from our public fund in the name of this and that?

Frankly, I wonder why should Gordon Brown apologise for the spending spree of the British MPs? We aren't surprised at all, dear PM. It is simply one dark side of the politicians all over the world. Gordon Brown should come to Bangladesh and learn from our



Even the Mother of Parliaments is not free from corruption.

politicians how to do it and then defend such allegations. Learn to lie, right and left, man! You have to be bold about it. Take the skin off your eyes. Come to Bangladesh and have a look at those health, gardening and entertainment bills! Even your spendthrift MPs would be amazed.

Mr. Brown, you have apologised on behalf of all the MPs. What magnanimity, indeed. But, if you come here, you will find for yourself that our political party chiefs, the *netas* or the *netris*, hardly like to talk about corruption of the party members. One *netri* chose to look the other way when grocery from MP hostel had gone to a member's personal kitchen. Then the high and mighty inside the parliament building chose to fall sick and then claim millions as medical bills. He chose to entertain guests and then send a mind-boggling bill to the poor people of this poor country to pay. He chose to see flowers blooming in his garden so he asked the poor people of this poor country to pay for his whim.

This latest corruption binge in the UK makes me look at our own corrupt cockroaches in the closet and makes me wonder

why should we allow a system to flourish where one can easily lay a hand on public money? I mean, why should public representatives ask for salary and other allowances for having volunteered to do the work of public service? Is it a job they are doing for which they should claim a salary? If it is a salaried job then we should ask for CVs and select the best candidates for the job through tough interviews. Then why the state should spend crores and crores to organise elections?

At least in salaried jobs, one can be put on trial for doing corruption, like embezzlement of funds. But when it is done by the elected MPs, we cannot even touch them! They seem to enjoy some kind of impunity. They seem to ride above the law. So, you see, we organise expensive elections with our (public) money to create MPs, and once elected, they turn into something we cannot touch. The supposed lawmakers become law violators and then remain out of reach of the same laws they create. What an interesting situation!

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Hand in hand

The idea of PPP thus sounds sensible. It is quite obvious that the initial phase might witness debates over the perceived pains and pleasures. But once the dust settles and the private sector is assured of the recognition of its due roles in the projects, both the government and the private parties will gain.

ABDUL BAYES

FINANCE Minister A.M.A. Muhith recently said that his ministry was poised to prepare three budgets for the upcoming fiscal year. In addition to the already existing revenue and capital budgets, the third one would embrace a public-private partnership (PPP) with a block grant from the government and contributions from the private sector. As reported, 30 projects in agriculture, power, roads and communication are in the preference list.

However, the Oxford dictionary defines "partnership" as a "joint business with shared risks and rewards." Arguably, PPP is not a "quick fix," but should be seen as "a medium to long-term relationship with shared aspirations and for an outcome of public interest on a continuously improving basis." And for many years, partnership has been espoused by government at all levels and of all hues.

The idea of PPP was espoused a century ago in the US and Europe, but got momentum since the late 1980s. From the national level, partnership now works at community level also (e.g. garbage collection and waste disposal schemes). The most important PPP since the 1990s has been in the areas of education, health and transportation.

Muhith's move is a definite departure from the traditional ways of financing public services by the "big brother" government alone. The performance of the public sector in the delivery of services came under heavy attack and, in response, the government privatised some of the poorly performing enterprises.

Privatisation of state-owned enterprises had been a pet policy of the multilateral donor agencies to increase efficiency. Unfortunately, we have very little empirical evidence to console us in this regard. Thus, neither market nor government could turn out to be effective in ensuring efficiency --

both having faced failures.

It is thus no surprise that alternative but innovative ways of meeting resource constraints should be on board. It has possibly become more imperative in a regime of recession, when the government needs huge amount of resources to meet multifarious demands. If put into practice, the proposed joint approach would possibly allow the public sector clients and the private sector suppliers to blend their special skills and achieve an outcome which neither could achieve alone.

A typical example would be a hospital building financed and constructed by a private developer and then leased to the hospital authority. The private developer then acts as landlord, providing house-keeping and other non-medical services while the hospital provides medical services.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has many projects implemented through the participation of NGOs and the private sector. The Global Alliances for Vaccines and Immunisation is financed 75% by the Bill Gates and Melinda Gates Foundation, which has a permanent seat in the supervisory body.

It is generally agreed that PPP approach offers a long-term, sustainable approach to improving society's infrastructure, enhancing the value of public assets and making

better use of tax payers' money.

First, it facilitates the government's capacity to develop an integrated solution for a project. In the conventional procurement programs, projects are broken down due to budget limitation, which causes delays and damages. It is said that the channel tunnel could not have been finished without the participation of the private sector.

Second, it facilitates creative and innovative approaches. The nexus between private and social benefit cost can better be established when both the parties have a stake in a project.

Third, such partnership also reduces the costs and time of implementation of the project. Transparent and accountable as they are, the projects appear to be the most cost-effective. It also trims the time taken for tenders.

The idea of PPP thus sounds sensible. It is quite obvious that the initial phase might witness debates over the perceived pains and pleasures. But once the dust settles and the private sector is assured of the recognition of its due roles in the projects, both the government and the private parties will gain. It is simply a win-win situation provided property rights, procurement process and worthy projects are upheld.

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Getting to know Obama

The story he told in his two books was about a man of multiple worlds who comes to terms with his father's abandonment and a confounding racial identity.

JACOB WEISBERG

BARACK Obama began his presidency with an unusual attribute, namely that the country already thought it understood him. The story he told in his two books was about a man of multiple worlds who comes to terms with his father's abandonment and a confounding racial identity. Obama resolves his anger by committing himself socially, religiously and eventually politically. He depicts his mature self as unusually able to see other points of view and bridge chasms.

The protagonist of these books is a persuasive and appealing character -- so much so that he left little demand for alternative explanations. As time goes by, though, Obama's Obama feels less satisfying. It's not that the author's projection of himself is distorted in any obvious way, but that it leaves too much unexplained -- his ambition, his aloofness, his fundamental beliefs. It's too soon to offer an interpretation of our president. But after four months in office, here are some emerging themes.

He sees the middle ground as high ground. Candidates who talk about bringing people together or changing the tone in

Washington are usually blowing happy smoke. But Obama's focus on reconciliation is clearly more than stik. We saw this impulse at work when he made preemptive concessions on his stimulus package in an effort to win Republican support. We saw it when, at the G20 summit, he personally brokered a compromise between the French and Chinese presidents over international tax havens. Every few days, Obama tries for a "new beginning" -- with Iran, Cuba, the Muslim world, Paul Krugman. Engaging with opponents animates him more than hanging with friends.

This is a wonderful instinct that is bettering America's image and making domestic politics more civil. But listening, and seeking compromise, is not a moral stance. Elevating it to one merely highlights the question of what Obama really stands for. The consensus-seeker repudiates torture but doesn't want to investigate it; he endorses gay equality but not in marriage or the military; he thinks government's role is to do whatever works. I continue to suspect him of harbouring deeper convictions.

He's the decider. Really. Accounts of Obama's decision making depict him as driving process as well as result. Faced with a

tough call about whether to declassify the Bush torture memos, Obama asked for a debate, listened intently and finished by dictating the next day's press release. He personally directed the government's restructuring demands for GM and Chrysler. Obama sees himself as both ringmaster and star performer. He appointed a galaxy of policy czars, yet now seems determined to do their jobs as well as his own.

The president's knack for deep dives into policy questions is impressive. But, as quick a study as he is, his supreme confidence may shade into overconfidence. He shows signs of suffering from the arrogance that often accompanies brilliance. It's unlikely, for instance, that Obama can function as his own grand strategy guru. But he doesn't seem inclined to give the job to anyone else.

He likes it hot. If you get someone close to Obama in a friendly conversation, he's likely to marvel at the president's comfort level with crisis. This is a man who plays it cool at all times but has never liked standing still. He ran for Congress prematurely and lost, and then ran for the Senate prematurely and got lucky. He was quickly bored in the Senate, where it took too long to get things done. When he was thinking about running for president, his question was whether the moment would be ripe for a great leader.

He needn't have worried. Obama has more troubles to deal with, foreign and domestic, than anybody since FDR. One day last month, he faced decisions about the fate of Detroit, a new strategy for Afghanistan, a North Korean

missile threat and a flood in Fargo. "What is this, a West Wing episode?" David Axelrod quipped, according to *The New York Times*. The issue here is capacity, not capability. Can any one person simultaneously manage so many issues in a hands-on way? Our last presidential micromanager, Jimmy Carter, did not have a pleasant time in Washington.

He's ruthless. In a recent interview with the *Times*, Obama described his economic policy as "ruthless pragmatism." Interesting choice of modifier. Obama has a healthy disdain for the overrated virtue of political loyalty. But around nominations, his lack of loyalty was slightly chilling to witness. If you're useful (Hillary Clinton), you can hang around with him. If you start to look like a liability (Tom Daschle), enjoy your time with the wolves. Before the inauguration, Christopher Hitchens described Obama as feline in his demeanour. The president is catlike also in his lack of evident affection for the people who serve him. His cracks at the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner about Hillary being an envious loser, Larry Summers' problem with women and training his new dog not to pee on Tim Geithner skirted cruelty. Even Obama's jokes about himself were telling: they were all about how great everyone thinks he is.

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