

Unceasing rains cause havoc in city life

It is a ringing wake-up call to the authorities

THE incessant rains which left Dhaka a ravaged city on the night between Monday and Tuesday should be seen as a ringing wake-up call for the administration. It is a clear statement of what has not been done about dealing with problems cropping up as a result of a downpour. In light of the grave environmental risks the capital has over the years been subjected to through an absence of planning as also construction of building structures with impunity, these rains have made it obvious that such conditions cannot be allowed to go on any longer. More pointedly, they are a reminder that despite such problems recurring, the authorities have clearly and carefully stayed away from resolving the severe drainage issues to which citizens have repeatedly drawn attention. Conditions have come to a pass where mindless urbanization has resulted in rainwater finding no outlet for clearing.

Many of the drainage-related problems the capital faces today are inextricably linked with the various housing projects that have over time displaced the floodplains around Dhaka. Real estate encroachment on open spaces has been of a vast nature, so much so that these spaces have disappeared under what has come to be known as jungles of concrete. Worse, the drainage system which once was pivotal in letting rainwater stream off the city streets has by now virtually been rendered non-existent through the rise of apartment complexes and shops where once there used to be simple residential zones. It is only in places like Gulshan and Banani that waterlogging and the like do not happen because the rainwater simply is able to flow into the neighbourhood lakes. That brings up the question once again of whether serious efforts will be undertaken to reclaim the natural water channels which once defined Dhaka. Of the forty such channels, we understand that twenty-six have been identified for reclamation. That is encouraging news, but just, for beyond surveys and studies, nothing tangible has been seen in terms of quick recovery and restoration of the moribund channels. It is important, therefore, that the Dhaka city master plan take all these factors into consideration if built-in measures are to be provided to rid the capital city of water-logging, especially in times of severe rainfall.

Even as we speak about such problems, we cannot ignore the effects of climate change which may be having a bad impact on our overall weather pattern. Seasonal rains apart, there is now a clear trend of sudden, concentrated rain (such as the one on Monday-Tuesday) creating havoc in urban life. Here too the question of whether the authorities are prepared to deal with the consequences comes up. Alongside that, the urgency of a dredging of rivers around Dhaka cannot be over-emphasised.

Overall, the rains and their consequences have thrown up a major challenge for the authorities. That consists in the main of initiating purposeful action, besides raising awareness among citizens, in handling crises arising out of the workings of nature. All available resources must be galvanised towards dealing with a problem that should have been neutralised years ago. In other words, structural arrangements should be in place to ensure that rainwater can be flushed out of the streets before they make a mess of lives.

Judicial cadre officials' self-demeaning behaviour

Is this expected from men of law?

THERE was everything rowdy about it, all of this outrageously repugnant to any sensibilities of civilised conduct that any number of educated citizens, let alone members of an organised service cadre are expected to exemplify by their behaviour, especially under public gaze. And, when such expectations are belied by men dealing with law and justice, they resorting to rowdy behaviour, what is their marker of distinction from a mob?

In an unprecedented act of collective misdemeanour, 70-80 judicial cadre officials coming in six minibuses rushed through the secretariat gate, converged around law minister's chamber, raised a hell-fire yelling names of some officials and insisted on meeting the minister to press home their demands. They broke every rule of the book, that they were supposed to uphold, with utter disdain. They had no entry passes to the secretariat, no appointment with the minister, and yet they demanded to see him. And when the policemen on security duty were trying to do their job, the agitating judges reacted angrily.

The demands they were articulating are hardly matters for public demonstration, as these had to do with mobile court ordinance empowering the executive magistrate to arrest or penalise offenders, separation of the legislative and parliamentary wing from the law and justice affairs wing under the ministry of law, justice and parliamentary affairs and framing of the rules of business. If the judicial officers had any point to make pertaining to the changes in line with the separation of the judiciary from the executive they could articulate the same through their association rather than barging into the secretariat and creating a scene that adversely reflected on their reputation. Some of them even came from outlying areas without prior permission leaving their posts unattended, just to jump into the bandwagon in a show of strength as if brandishing a collective armour of impunity to force the government's hands into doing something that basically required civilised deliberation to be sorted out. It shames us to say that they should behave.

The Awami League, now and yesterday

In Bangabandhu's day, even though his colleagues acknowledged his stewardship of the party without question, they also made sure that they operated and thrived in their own light. That is not what you see happening in the party today.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THE Awami League has had an election, of sorts. There are two ways of looking at it. There is, first, the positive way. That the party is closely involved with the grassroots, that it has always been an organisation truly of the masses and for them, has once again been proved by its recent council session. It was, in a number of ways, a reminder for us of the heritage the Awami League has been heir to since it took form in 1949 and substance in the 1950s. That was when stalwarts like Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani served as the unquestioned symbols of the party, though by 1957 Bhashani had already decided to go his separate way.

If now you think of the maturity the Awami League came into, it was in the 1960s when a band of young men -- and in this group came Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Tajuddin Ahmed, Syed Nazrul Islam, M. Mansoor Ali and A.H.M. Quamruzzaman -- painted an entirely new ethos for the party through transforming it into a bandwagon of Bengali nationalism. Mujib would become Bangabandhu before the end of that remarkable decade; and the others would in their discrete individuality strike out as stars in the Bengali political firmament.

So when the Awami League decided on Friday to re-elect Sheikh Hasina as its president and choose Syed Ashrafur Islam as its general secretary, its members and followers obviously believed it was doing all of that in line with tradition. And they were right, in a way. In a way, meaning not in

every way. That is where the negative comes in. What was missing at this year's council was the verve and individuality that defined the council sessions of the 1950s and 1960s. In those days, camaraderie underpinned the working of the party; and every figure in the party, especially at the leadership level, mattered.

Mutual respect was a given and within that ambience of respect lively internal debate on the issues was carried on. Dissent was not construed as treason and deference to the party leader did not mutate into subservience. Bangabandhu freely sought the advice of his colleagues who, in their turn, were not averse to demonstrating their independence of thought. It was this spirit of democracy which powered the Awami League and kept it going.

You do not observe a continuity in terms of the old heritage, not much of it anyway, in the Awami League today. And we speak of the Awami League and not of any other party because the Awami League has mattered, will matter in national politics. That being our point of view, we are not quite enthused by what has been happening in the party. Sheikh Hasina is back at the helm for the sixth time. There is little question that her leadership of the party has been effective and purposeful. That is the good side of it. The bad is in knowing that in all these years since 1981, the party has not had the chance to throw up alternative leaders. Every senior politician in the party has lived in Sheikh Hasina's shadow. And the shadow has diminished the men who could have been larger than life.

In Bangabandhu's day, even though his colleagues acknowledged his stewardship



A democratic election without candidates?

of the party without question, they also made sure that they operated and thrived in their own light. That is not what you see happening in the party today. Indeed, there are certain realities that disturb you when you stumble upon them. Sheikh Hasina, since her emergence from incarceration in the caretaker days, has been speaking of forgiveness for those who she suspects sought to reform the party through engineering her ouster from the Awami League. She spoke of forgiveness again at the council session.

Now, a couple of questions come up here. The first relates to whether this idea of forgiveness is not being carried to an uncomfortable extreme. And the second is a more pointed one: why must a point of view which is at variance with that of the party leader be taken as disobedience or rebellion? And then comes a third question: when the party leader expects or asks for unquestioned loyalty, to what extent is the cause of democracy in the party and by

extension the country served?

This emphasis on loyalty has stultified the growth of new leadership in the Awami League. No one in the party has ever challenged Sheikh Hasina for the presidency of the organisation. Party general secretaries have been approved by acclamation rather than through elections involving a set of candidates. That was the way Abdul Jalil came in. That is how Syed Ashrafur Islam has arrived on the scene. Things worked out that way because the party chief has wanted them that way. It is politics centred around the leader. It carries the risk of a vacuum developing and widening in the party.

And that can, perhaps will, happen now that the party president and general secretary have been empowered to choose members to the central committee and presidium of the party. The Awami League was supposed to be different, wasn't it?

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Indian envoy's avoidable remarks

The diplomat's job is not only to promote bilateral relations at an official level but also to strengthen friendly relations between the people of two states. In that capacity a diplomat has to cultivate friendly working relations with every tier of society, including various political parties and the civil society.

HARUN UR RASHID

MOST people in Bangladesh are surprised to note that an experienced and well-seasoned diplomat like India's High Commissioner to Bangladesh has been involved in avoidable controversy for his reported public statements.

The top Indian diplomat is known to have had two earlier postings in Dhaka, and knowledgeable people say that he should have known the sensitivity and sentiments of the people of Bangladesh much better than anybody else. However, it seems that his past experience has not helped him in this for inexplicable reasons.

A diplomat is one who can tell a person "to go to hell" in such a way that the person looks forward to the trip. This is how a diplomat can say many unpalatable things in a sugar-coated pill.

Diplomacy is all about human relationship, and a top envoy (ambassador/high commissioner) is a person who has to build trust and confidence among the people in the country where he/she is posted. Trust and confidence do not come easily because they have to be nurtured

carefully. It is like reputation, which does not grow easily. It not only takes time but also needs tact, skill, patience and perseverance to develop an array of relations with the host country.

The diplomat's job is not only to promote bilateral relations at an official level but also to strengthen friendly relations between the people of two states. In that capacity a diplomat has to cultivate friendly working relations with every tier of society, including various political parties and the civil society.

One basic imperative for a diplomat is knowing when, where and how to speak and what not to speak. Other qualities include tenacity, presence of mind, sense of humour, coolness under pressure, ability to win people's minds, and appreciation of another point of view.

The views of mainstream opposition political parties on major national issues need to be taken into account whenever a diplomat speaks. Because, in democracy, today's major opposition party could form the next government.

The top India diplomat has not been too blessed lately and has said some curious things. His propensity to misspeak has created problems in Bangladesh.

Three matters have been subject to hot controversy, and they deserve mention.

First, at a public seminar on regional connectivity in June, where the Bangladesh foreign minister was present, the diplomat referred to Bangladeshi water experts as "so-called experts." This has been perceived as totally unwarranted, and as diminishing the image and reputation of Bangladeshi experts.

Furthermore, whenever a foreign minister is present at a function, a diplomat scrupulously observes circumspection in what he/she says. The diplomat must not let his frustration or emotion carry away his/her serenity and coolness. The Bangladesh foreign minister later said that, in her view, the top India diplomat might be in breach of diplomatic propriety. In diplomatic terms, this is perceived as a mild "rebuke."

Second, in July, his reported allegation that 25,000 Bangladeshis who get visa each year overstay in India, landed him into a controversy. The allegation was promptly refuted by the Bangladesh foreign office.

The foreign office said that the "information with the government does not correspond with the observation of the high commissioner. Moreover, Bangladesh has not received any official communication from the government of India in this regard." Furthermore, the high commissioner had found it suitable to share this information at a meeting titled "Bangladesh-India Economic Relations," where, ordinarily, positive aspects of bilateral relations are highlighted.

Third -- about delays in visa processing --

it is reported the diplomat had also made another unpleasant observation that over 80% of those who queue up in front of the Indian High Commission in Dhaka for visas are "touts and brokers." These words are undiplomatic when referring to Bangladeshi nationals. Many things could be said in different ways without offending anyone.

Although the Indian High Commission came up with a clarification that the top diplomat's remarks on visa seekers were "misreported" in the news media, "leading to misunderstanding and unwarranted controversy," the damage has been done. The very fact that a clarification was issued proves that something has gone amiss in his initial statement.

In all these cases, the Indian high commissioner hurt the sentiments of most people and provoked a major party in Bangladesh, that has twice formed the government in the past, leaving it with little choice but for the top party leaders to react sharply.

The major opposition party has made this an issue, and has asked the government to request the Indian government to withdraw the top diplomat.

His avoidable remarks have placed the Sheikh Hasina's government in an embarrassing position at a time when her government and the Congress-led government in New Delhi are thought to have been working well together in developing a range and pattern of bilateral political and economic relationships.

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Where is the justice?

It is time to unite our voice to say No, to ask for justice, to unveil truth. We must form a resistance against such crimes, violence and brutality. And we must never forget that we are the ultimate inheritors of all the misfortunes, as well as fortunes, of our country.

NADIA AFRIN

GANOTANTRI Party leader and labour rights activist, Nurul Islam, and his son Tamohar Islam passed away in a mysterious fire days before the election in December 2008. Political leaders, cultural activists and labour unions have long suspected the incident to be an act of sabotage and rallied to demand a thorough investigation and call for justice. Eight months on, the investigation has yielded no results, and we are left with more questions than answers.

In its initial report, the Fire Service

department, being a part of the investigative team, suggested that an electrical short circuit resulted in a fire, which caused the compressor of the refrigerator to explode.

Within days, the Dhaka Power Development Company produced a report indicating that the circuit breakers were intact and negating the possibility of a short circuit. In addition, an ATN report by Munni Shaha clearly showed that the compressor of the refrigerator was in one piece.

Family testimony confirmed that the refrigerator in question was not in use and was not even plugged in. Despite mount-

ing evidence to the contrary, upon reinvestigating the case, the CID adamantly reiterated that the fire was an accident caused by an electrical short circuit.

The investigations found no satisfactory evidence of a short circuit in the electrical connections in the building, but the government committees, for whatever reason, are blissfully ignoring all these evidence and sticking to the story of fire and an electrical short circuit.

What is the reason behind these inconsistent and contradictory reports? Is it incompetence or negligence?

This is by no means new in Bangladesh. Political killings in Bangladesh have a long and tragic track record since liberation. Various report suggest that some 1,300 lives have been lost to political violence in Bangladesh over the last ten years.

There were numerous instances of attacks (including grenade attacks) against political leaders during 2001 through 2006, attacks against cultural activists at the Romna Botomul bomb blast in 2001, and there have been many

attacks and threats against intellectuals and journalists.

As time goes on, the list of unresolved deaths grows longer and the hope for justice fades. And yet we remain strangely complacent and move from tragedy to tragedy with remarkable ease.

Change begins with ourselves. It is our responsibility to stand up and speak out against political violence. It is our democratic right to demand justice and ensure that the investigative authorities either pursue their duty to the fullest extent or are held accountable. We can no longer afford to be silent.

It is time to unite our voice to say No, to ask for justice, to unveil truth. We must form a resistance against such crimes, violence and brutality. And we must never forget that we are the ultimate inheritors of all the misfortunes, as well as fortunes, of our country.

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