

Bridge that impedes Buriganga navigability

The issue demands prompt investigation and addressing

THE report that vessels laden with cargoes cannot pass under the Third Buriganga Bridge seemingly due to low vertical clearance of the bridge from the water level of the river should be a matter of serious concern for all. To all appearances, it is a telltale sign of some compromise made somewhere at the implementation phase of the bridge. Though no one has so far owned up to the apparent fault in the construction of the bridge, the fact remains that transportation of goods through the river route is getting severely constrained at the bridge point.

The measurement made by the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) hydrographers, which shows that the height of the bridge from the water level is two metres lower than it should be, has been questioned by the project engineers. But their point of discord is concerned more with the authority of BIWTA people to measure the height than with the merit of the measurement of the bridge height made by the latter. The users of the river route, the people of the locality and others concerned are hardly interested in such kind of arguments over jurisdictional or authority-related controversies between the Roads and Highways (R&H) department and the BIWTA. They want simple answer to the glaringly visible shortcomings of the bridge as it hampers transportation of river-going vessels passing under it.

Since the bridge in question is conceived as part of the Dhaka Circular Waterway Project connecting the Buriganga, Turag, Balu and Sitalakhya rivers surrounding the capital city, whose aim is to reduce the severe traffic congestion within the city, the navigability of the rivers all the year round is a crucial issue for the success of the project. But if the bridges on these rivers themselves turn out to be the main hindrance to the movement of the river traffic, then the very utility of the project will come under serious question. Such fear is not quite unfounded, as some officials of the said waterway project have complained of similar 'vertical clearance-related problems' in the case of half a dozen other bridges!

If the apprehensions voiced by the officials as reported prove true, it will be a serious blow to the envisaged Circular Waterway Project as well as to the prospect of solving the city's traffic problem.

The problem as reported about the Third Buriganga Bridge, therefore, demands serious attention from the government. The government should carry out a thorough investigation into the matter to bring out the truth.

Since this is a foreign-funded project, we need to be cautious about the use of the project fund and its implementation. Any fault or lapse found in the design of the project must be immediately pointed out and corrected without delay. Otherwise it is not only the money that risks being wasted, the full potential of the bridge as a facilitator of trade and commerce could also remain underutilised.

Global competitiveness

Going five notches up is good, but not enough

BANGLADESH'S standing has gone five notches up, according to the Global Competitiveness Report, which is an indicator of the overall investment and business climate prevailing in a country. It is good news since low global competitiveness has always been a stumbling block insofar as foreign investment here is concerned. However, the overall 106th position out of the 133 countries surveyed is still not satisfactory, as most of the other countries in the region have done better, with India finishing among the top 50.

As the report says poor infrastructure is the number one drawback faced by the investors. Obviously, investors look for facilities like efficient communications networks and reliable supply of power which remains a sore point in our scheme of development. The decision makers have to take note of the observations made in the report and take remedial measures. Of course infrastructure development is a longer-term issue which cannot be addressed overnight. But the report has indeed pointed out the areas the government must address on a priority basis.

The observations made by Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya, Fellow of Centre for Policy Dialogue, on this issue need to be examined closely. He has said that problems like weak infrastructure, corruption and an inefficient bureaucracy might become structural deficiencies unless these are addressed with a sense of urgency. What it boils down to is that we need a far more dynamic, efficient and corruption-free bureaucracy along with the much needed facilities for the investors to have a competitive edge over other developing countries. He further observed that the anti-corruption drive in 2008 was not that successful but still insisted on identifying poor infrastructure as an even greater problem than corruption. However, we believe that eliminating corruption should be as high on the government's agenda as building the infrastructure that would facilitate trade and commerce.

The country is now doing better in macro-economic management and has attained a measure of economic stability which have helped it improve its position. So, the picture is not all bleak. But the global competitiveness ranking should be regarded as something more than just a conceptual matter having little bearing on trade and investment. The countries today are fighting hard to attract foreign investment and make the best out of the limited basket through offering all kinds of facilities to foreign investors. That we still do not have the needed infrastructure makes it clear that the issue was never dealt with in light of global developments. We must now lay due emphasis on it.

Reorganisation of the BDR

From what one has been able to gather so far, the suggested force structure will revamp the organisation and make it more effective since the control and command will be decentralised once the proposed regional structure is put into operation.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

THE draft paper dealing with the reorganisation of the Bangladesh Rifles is with the government awaiting approval. We do not know the details but would hope that the government would let the public in on the major changes that are being contemplated. Otherwise, there will be unnecessary speculation and more disinformation, deliberate or otherwise, for example, the news about the proposed curtailing of BDR manpower, which is not true.

The matter is the talk of the town. And thanks to the international and national radio and other electronic media, one has come to know as much about the various opinions on the matter as about the many misperceptions about the command, control and function of the BDR.

One might add that the ignorance (not surprisingly) of the nitty-gritty is not restricted to the common man only but, surprisingly, also those who should know better have offered views that are as far from the actual, from as much as one has been able to verify.

Reorganisation of a force is a constant

process and is an indispensable part of any organisation that wants to retain its dynamism and be in keeping with the changing environment within which it operates. As it is, remodelling of the border force was a pressing need that the government should have addressed of its own volition but which it constrained to take in hand only because of the regrettable 25/2 incident. And what makes the matter evoke so much public interest is the backdrop against which the force is being recast. Given that the government investigation remains incomplete, and the initiation of the legal process is yet to start, it has assumed even greater significance than it would have had otherwise.

And one wonders whether the legal process can really commence basing on a partial report. And if, as we were given to understand by the home minister's comments that the charge sheets would be framed on the basis of the inquiry report, will that be possible under the circumstances.

One hopes that the government will make public the full report, although a seven-page summary was issued to the

press after the report was handed over to the home minister, perhaps for the first time that has happened in this country.

From what one has been able to gather so far, the suggested force structure will revamp the organisation and make it more effective since the control and command will be decentralised once the proposed regional structure is put into operation. And contrary to what one has heard in some section of the media, the strength of the force is being increased considerably to be able to cater to the blind spots of the border. And among other things, new measures are being envisaged to provide the BOP patrol with limited mobility and flexibility. Making up the potential shortage of manpower from retired military personnel is a good idea as long as it remains a temporary expedient.

These are all very well and good. But there several issues that one feels one must comment on for whatever it is worth.

The first and foremost is the matter of command of the force by military officers. There can never be an alternative to it. Given that the secondary role of the BDR is to beef up the army on the ground during outbreak of hostility, and it will have to perform classical tactical tasks that can be directed by officers who are trained and well versed in it. Those who are talking about doing away with army officers altogether are either ignorant or speaking with motives that are questionable.

Frankly, what is known but not so much talked about is that much of the ineffi-

ciency and vice that had afflicted some BDR troops since long have been removed, made possible primarily because of the presence of very high grade army officers seconded to the BDR, which was not the case till very recently. However, this does not preclude having officers from within the force itself, but that can be only up to a particular level.

The task of the border force is such that it will not allow any other arrangement. And if, from what one heard about the government thinking of employing retired officers to fill in the vacancy, and would gradually replace the military officers from within border force, (this was, as I am told, voiced in a TV discussion) is true, it would be simply courting disaster.

I am very averse too to the idea of changing the BDR uniform except on operational grounds, and also its name. We must respect tradition, and it is not that the entire force was involved with the massacre. In any case, the process to disband some of the units that were directly involved is underway, very rightly. I would also suggest that wearing of army uniform by officers presently posted in the BDR should be discontinued, if not done so already. This only enhances the psychological gap between the commanders and their troops and leaves them feeling unwanted, a situation that must not be allowed to occur at all.

Brig. Gen. Shahedul Anam Khan ndc, psc, (Retd) is Editor, Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

National education policy

But it will not be possible to translate the goals and objectives into reality if politicisation of the education sector is not stopped. It is imperative to have a guideline in the policy as to how to rid the educational institutions from dirty politics.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

IT is good news that the nation is going to have a new education policy aiming to educate all, irrespective of their religion, gender, socio-economic condition and geographical location. On September 2, the National Education Policy Formulation Committee submitted to the government the eighth such report since the independence of the country.

The government constituted a 16-member committee headed by Prof. Kabir Chowdhury on April 8 to formulate a modern national education policy in line with the 1974 Qudrat-e-Khuda Education Commission. The committee has suggested extension of primary education up to class VIII and secondary education up to class XII.

The salient features of the recommendations of the committee are the suggestion to make primary education free, universal and compulsory, and the mandatory inclusion of six compulsory subjects under all streams of education. Besides, all students must study their own religions and receive education that develops moral values and patriotism.

The new education policy has sug-

gested that the secondary level of education should be from class IX to XII, and that uniform curriculum and syllabus in several subjects should be followed in all mediums including madrasa. Madrasa education should be modernised, including science and information technology in the curriculum that should focus on developing the skill and capacity to respond to the need in the employment market.

It also recommended formation of a permanent education commission to implement the education policy, and decentralisation of the National University by setting up centres in all divisions. All such recommendations are to be welcomed, but the harsh reality is that we have so far failed in implementing such recommendations.

The education minister said that the draft education policy would be finalised soon, and its full-fledged implementation would start from January next year. Any change to the education policy needs close scrutiny, as it will influence the entire education system for a long time. Therefore, the new education policy deserves more serious consideration by all stakeholders.

The policy aims to improve the present state of education at all levels. But what remains a major cause of concern is that the government is not institutionally prepared enough for implementation of such a vital policy.

The integration of the existing level of primary education with the next three classes of the old secondary level and severe dearth of competent teachers for operation of new education policy in the rural areas and madrasas pose the greatest challenge towards its implementation. Printing of books according to the new syllabi is impossible within such a short period.

The new education policy envisages basic changes to set the country's outmoded education system in the tune with the fast moving world. But it will not be possible to translate the goals and objectives into reality if politicisation of the education sector is not stopped. It is imperative to have a guideline in the policy as to how to rid the educational institutions from dirty politics.

Under the new policy, MPs can be chairmen of the governing bodies of four educational institutions in their constituencies, and the remaining ones will need the MP's recommendation for selection of the governing body chairman and members. One really fails to understand why the involvement of MPs in the affairs of educational institutions is so essential, while they have a party affiliation.

It cannot altogether be denied that the chaos in the governing bodies of educa-

tional institutions also contributes to the declining standard of education. As the government seeks to reorganise and reshape the country's education system to turn Bangladesh into a prosperous country, it is expected that it will also take steps to keep the educational institutions free from the machinations of the politicians.

The National Education Policy-2009 is expected to fulfill national aspirations as it has some very essential and beneficial provisions. But it will be like putting the cart before the horse if the government moves to implement the policy without strengthening its efforts in the area of capacity building and recruiting an adequate number of competent teachers.

Many countries in Asia, including India and China, have made remarkable progress in all fields after changing their education system and taking it as the main facilitator of economic growth. But Bangladesh is lagging far behind because of the lack of political vision.

The government formed as many as eight education commissions and committees since independence but not a single recommendation by them has been implemented, which has left education in a mess.

Let us hope that this new policy will not collect dust in some closet like the previous ones, and will be implemented in full to make our education capable of coping with the changing times and the development in the field of science and technology.

A.N.M. Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star. E-mail: anmhaque@hotmail.com

When the young try to defy death

Youth is more than a statistic. Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy was 60 years old, when the tired are supposed to retire. But he had a youthful demeanour, the energy, spirit and mind of a man who saw more horizons before the inescapable grave or pyre.

M.J. AKBAR

THE ageing rarely die suddenly, for they do not take life for granted. The young, particularly when armoured by success, laugh away danger, until danger has the last laugh.

Youth is more than a statistic. Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy was 60 years old, when the tired are supposed to retire. But he had a youthful demeanour, the energy, spirit and mind of a man who saw more horizons before the inescapable grave or pyre. Risk is built into such a mentality, for the young, by definition, dismiss death as a distant fact.

Madhavrao Scindia and Rajesh Pilot, like YSR, saw themselves as young, and behaved with the joie de vivre of youth. Scindia, in another fated helicopter, challenged the elements, and Pilot, driving a light car, pressed his foot too hard on the pedal. YSR must have smiled in disdain when told that the weather would be inclement. Optimism is synonymous with youth. Pessimism, or its boring cousin, realism, is for the

depressed and the faint-hearted.

An election victory is an unreliable measure of a politician's value. Rajasekhara Reddy's triumph in 2004 might not have been possible without the hard work he put in, but it could be argued that it was Chandrababu Naidu's loss as much as Reddy's gain. One of the by-laws of democracy is that every good opposition needs the full cooperation of a terrible government to succeed. The true worth of a politician is known only by his ability to manage the tedious task of administration.

Victory prances on banners; there are no headlines for good governance. It is visible only after five years, during the battle for re-election. Rajasekhara Reddy was not without his share of controversy; his opponents accused him of corruption. But he won in 2009 because he understood that the key to delivery is what has been done for the poor. Fashionable economists sneer at populism. Any sensible politician prefers popularity to a certificate from the World Bank.

His death is a blow to his government,

obviously, but an incalculable loss to his party, for he twice delivered the fulcrum of the Congress presence in the Lok Sabha. Factionalism was hardly the sole sin of the Andhra Congress, but it was the rampant crime. If you have any sympathy for the ruling party you don't want to know what the Reddys and Raos used to be up to. Their humiliation at the hands of N.T. Rama Rao intensified the civil wars, rather than calming them down; and the elevation of P.V. Narasimha Rao as the first prime minister from the state did nothing to improve the culture of this fractious lot.

All that Rao did as prime minister was to add another faction to the Andhra Congress, this one headed by a less-than-competent son. Rajasekhara Reddy found both ends of the solution. He won an election, without which factionalism cannot be controlled; and then he assuaged hunger on all sides. It is a stupid victor who believes in winner-take-all.

The danger before the Congress is obvious. A localised earthquake has scattered what had been built; rebuilding is so much more difficult, since moorings have been displaced. It will be virtually impossible for any successor to maintain internal peace, because we are back to a party of lesser-known equals.

Irrespective of who gets the job -- the suave and senior S. Jaipal Reddy, the rugged veteran K. Rosaliah who has served in every Congress government since 1978

and has been made caretaker leader, or the young and ambitious Reddy son Y.S. Jagan -- there will be resentment among those who have been denied.

Jagan has created a media sprawl across the state that could be particularly useful in any factional feud, and he will also consider himself beneficiary of the sympathy accruing from his father's early death. No politician considers himself an untested peer's inferior. Since only victory in an election will establish the next chief minister's credentials, and there are more than four years left for that, you can do your own political math.

Rajasekhara Reddy was a Christian; a close relative of his is a modern evangelist. He went to Jerusalem on a thanksgiving pilgrimage after his election victory. As a believer, perhaps he should have remembered that there is an angel of death. When you feel young, you never really worry if the angel leaves its visiting card behind after a close call.

Three years ago Rajasekhara Reddy got into a hired helicopter at Giddalur and flew into dense cloud and incessant rain over Srisaillam. His pilot dropped height, and his chief security officer studied maps he happened to be carrying to discover the nearest point at which a helicopter could land. The angel is rarely cheated twice. And the young are not invincible.

M.J. Akbar is Director of Publications, Covert.