

Latest quakes another wakeup call

Time to set a preparedness strategy in motion

WHEN the nation was in a festive mood during the Eid, the capital city as well as some districts of the north-eastern region was shaken by earthquakes with their epicentres in Bhutan and Myanmar respectively. Tuesday's quake that touched the capital in the early afternoon was termed 'mild' (5.4 on the Richter scale), according to the Met office, while that of the previous day had a magnitude of 6.4. Strangely though, the same quake with its origin in eastern Bhutan and which was measured at 6.3 by the US Geological survey killed 11 people in that country. So, we should thank our stars that it did not result in anything serious in Bangladesh as it did near its epicentre in Bhutan.

The comparisons on the consequences of the Monday's quake at its origin in Bhutan and in Bangladesh lying 462 kilometres down in the Southwest is very important as it took its toll even in a sparsely populated region in eastern Bhutan. The other fearsome aspect of the tremors as far as Bangladesh is concerned is that they are coming from different directions, some from the south in the Bay of Bengal, while others from the Northwest in Mynanmar and also from the Northeast in Bhutan. Moreover, frequent incidents of earthquakes, experts say, also portend the likely occurrence of severer shocks anytime in the near future.

The frequency of the quake incidents in the last few months and the premonitions of the experts cannot be overlooked anymore. In fact, quakes really hit without warning.

That is more so because in July, the High Court (HC) had issued a directive to the government to take urgent steps to procure rescue equipment and other measures as safeguard against any future quake of devastating intensity. The latest tremors should be regarded as another pressing wakeup call from Nature.

But where are the awareness campaigns, civil defence exercises, periodic drills at the workplaces and the educational institutions as suggested by experts and various quarters concerned after the July directive of the HC? We are yet to know how far the capacity of the fire-fighting units has been improved through induction of more men and materials or mounting monitoring mechanism to see if the proper building codes are being observed in the construction of the high-rise buildings. At the same time, the media should also rise to the occasion by lending a hand to the government's awareness building programmes.

Accidents during Eid holidays

Indictment on poor road safety standards

ROAD accidents have taken a heavy toll of human lives during the Eid holidays, with at least 20 people being killed across the country on last Friday and Saturday alone, including a high number of the injured. People returning to the city after Eid remain as exposed to accidents as they were during their outbound journeys. The stupendous increase in the levels of public mobility tend to only exacerbate the existing vulnerabilities to road mishaps across the country. Nothing has concrete been done to minimise road hazards in a planned and synchronised way.

Sadly enough, traffic rules take leave of us during the Eid holidays and all sorts of blatant violations of safety regulations become the order of the day. The buses are driven by helpers promoted to meet shortage of experienced drivers; overloading is common and so is the mad race for reaching the destinations at breakneck speed.

The passengers whose lives are at stake do not have any say in such matters. All they can do is buy tickets in the black market, usually paying five times the normal fare and pray for nothing untoward to happen. They reach their destinations if they are lucky enough, otherwise they get killed or maimed. What overloading can lead to was witnessed in Natore when two young men were killed after falling from the rooftop of a bus when it had to swerve to avoid a head-on collision with another vehicle. Yet, nobody is held responsible for pushing innocent people towards such grave dangers.

Bus and transport owners and operators have always turned a deaf ear to the appeal for reining in the unruly drivers trying to outpace each other. The owners also fail to attach due value to human lives as they allow overloading-- another reason behind accidents. Finally, employing helpers as drivers is a criminal offence that they never hesitate to commit.

Now, the question is what the law enforcers are doing to protect human lives. Their performance is dismal as they fail to enforce the traffic rules, so crucially important for avoiding accidents. The law enforcers have to perform a lot better in a country where more than 4,000 people are killed in road accidents every year.

Columnists, commentaries, and politicians

Politicians often take public interest decisions as long as they're not in conflict with their own and their party's interest. They dismiss commentaries as mere opinions, even though they reflect the prevailing public concerns on issues of national interest.

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WHILE reading Syed Badrul Ahsan's (SBA) September 16 piece about the law secretary's apology and its post hoc acceptance by parliament's law affairs committee, some questions came to my mind: What impact, if any, do columnists and commentaries have on politicians' behaviour and the country's governance? Simply put: Do commentaries matter?

Over the years, since March 2005 when I started writing my weekly column, whenever I met a politician I always introduced myself as a Daily Star columnist, hoping I would be recognised through my articles. To the contrary, I was utterly disappointed-- politicians don't have time to read newspaper articles. I then started asking for their email contacts but, as one would expect, many don't have one and those who do couldn't remember off-hand what it was. Anyway, the few I could collect receive my articles once they're published-- and some even ardently offer their comments.

It's understandable why elected politicians would be time constrained to read commentaries. They have many other pressing matters to deal with-- lobbying for their cronies, courting their bosses and high officials, and of course, running their self-aggrandising businesses and ventures.

Politicians often take public interest decisions as long as they're not in conflict with their own and their party's interest. They dismiss commentaries as mere opinions, even though they reflect the prevailing public concerns and reactions on issues of national and community interest. Rightly or wrongly, politicians in general show indifference to commentaries because they see them as mere depictions of their failures and indiscretions. They consider critical views as partisan opinions even though they're premised on objective analyses. However, there are a few who'd read commentaries only if they agreed with the views expressed or if they were about the opposition parties.

In any media-savvy society, columnists play an important role. They provide information and refreshing ideas, and often opinions and interpretations on many issues. Columnists usually have a unique voice, which distinguishes them from other writers. Dedicated and gifted columnists develop a loyal readership that looks forward to reading their columns on a regular basis. To increase that base, they research, investigate, interpret, and communicate news and public affairs issues in their own creative ways through their columns so that their readers can relate to those and also want to read about them.

For politicians and general readers, it's

impractical to compile information from a multitude of sources as columnists do in one short piece. The intricate task is presenting the information within a limited number of words in a logical and sometimes humorous style, so that the readers can appreciate and identify with the issues involved and at the same time relish reading it.

The failure of the Parliament's standing committees (PSC) to make controversial officials appear before the committee for a hearing is simply unheard of in a true democracy. If that culture isn't enforced and established now, when will it happen? SBA's article is highly germane to a much broader question: Do newspaper commentaries, academic seminars and discourses on political and governance issues have any discernible influence on the politicians in power?

Ever since democracy was restored, political parties have been promising instituting of local government. Numerous seminars, talk shows, and newspaper commentaries were devoted to this issue. The outcome: politicians did what they thought would serve their cause while disregarding the aspirations of the people and the elected local officials.

Everyone recognises that students' politics affiliated with political parties is the primary reason for deteriorating academic standard and campus violence. Despite overwhelming call from all circles to segregate student politics from national political parties, nothing has changed and nothing will.

Take another case-- international disrepute of being the world's number one in corruption. So much has been written and talked about in seminars and street pro-

tests, but to what avail? Instead of eliminating corruption as promised-- the ruling party eliminated all corruption charges against its party's alleged "corrupticians" as politically motivated cases. Instead of strengthening the Anti-corruption Commission to fight graft, they turned it into an office of acquiescence for withdrawal of the graft charges against the ruling party's politicians.

What about democratic reforms? Are there any words left unwritten or unspoken in any forum about the exigencies of democratic reforms in political parties? The outcome is: both major parties sidelined their reformists from party hierarchies and in some case even disbanded them altogether. These are just a few examples to show that no matter what the intellectual community say and think, politicians have their own agenda to implement.

Finally, something has happened. I felt somewhat encouraged after I learned that my last week's article, "Climate change equity," has been distributed among the parliamentary committee members on climate and environment. This should be initiated by members of all other parliamentary committees and public institutions whenever information rich commentaries are published in national media. This will develop an enlightened nexus between columnists and politicians.

Lastly, criticising Awami League's failings and imprudence does not necessarily mean that an alternative party such as BNP is preferred-- it simply means we want to see a new and reformed Awami League, the sooner the better.

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Wiping out the forests

The Forest Act 1927 is not adequate anymore. It was enacted only to generate revenue from the forest resources. A drastic amendment of existing laws is desperately needed for protection of our forests from the grabbers and for trying the plunderers in the court of law.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

WHILE the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) has launched a worldwide tree plantation campaign under the title "Plant for the Planet: Billion Tree Campaign" in order to avert calamitous climate change, some local political goons and dishonest timber merchants, in connivance with a section of unscrupulous officials of the forest department, have been cutting down trees-- thereby destroying the coastal ecology.

A Daily Star report, which said that some local Awami League and Jubo League men have cut down 30,000 *Jhau* trees on about 250 acres of land in Cox's Bazar to sell land in the form of plots for hotels, motels and business firms, is really a matter of grave concern.

Influential quarters have also grabbed 17-kilometres of the beach in Kuakata, destroying the greenbelts, which has made the area vulnerable to cyclones and tidal bores.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, while

addressing the third meeting of the national environment committee at her office on September 16, directed the authorities concerned to take stern action against those involved in the plundering of thousands of *Jhau* trees in Teknaf beach. It, however, remains to be seen in the coming days whether the government means business.

Illegal logging has also been going on unabated in the reserve forests in Rangamati, contributing to deforestation and destruction of wildlife. Almost all the reserve forests, stretching over 6.85 lakh acres, in the district have assumed a barren look due to mindless logging.

Forest officials of all levels directly help the loggers to plunder the forest in exchange for hefty bribes. Local people allege that unscrupulous officials of forest department hire outsiders as day labourers to cut down trees.

The extent of corruption that has gripped the county's forest department is beyond imagination. The all-pervading corruption that devoured our forest resources came to

light only after the chief conservator of forests (CCF), Osman Gani, was arrested by the army-led joint force during the tenure of immediate past caretaker government.

Four forest officials have been suspended for negligence in discharging duties and aiding the plunderers of the trees at Teknaf beach. If a list of the most corrupt government offices is made, the forest department is sure to be among the top four. So, the government needs to go tough to tackle the unabated corruption in the forest department.

Wiping out of forests is also being done through grabbing the forest-land. Forest-land grabbing is so rampant and carried on with such impunity that it has almost ceased to be a cognisable offence.

According to a forest department report, some former ministers, MPs and political bigwigs have illegally occupied nearly 2,50,000 acres of forest-land with the help of top level forest officials. Lack of proper laws and unbridled corruption in the forest department have helped the land grabbers to stay free.

The Forest Act 1927 is not adequate anymore. It was enacted only to generate revenue from the forest resources. A drastic amendment of existing laws is desperately needed for protection of our forests from the grabbers and for trying the plunderers in the court of law.

According to government statistics, the area under forestation in the country is less than 10 percent of its total land area, while

the required standard set for any country is 25 percent. Bangladesh is facing numerous environmental hazards due to wiping out of forests.

Deforestation has taken place at such an increasing rate that it threatens the ecological balance of the country. Amidst such frustrating developments in our forests, a group of blind people at Nilphamari has started planting trees on both sides of the roads with missionary zeal. It is indeed a good lesson for all of us to learn.

Among the various tasks of a democratically elected government, an often overlooked chore in our country is protection of the forests. Therefore, it is the time for the government to come out of its slumber and take some urgent and effective steps to save the forests.

Forests are one of our important natural resources, which contribute much towards facing calamitous climate challenge. Unfortunately, the people who were made custodians of such valuable national resources are involved in massive plundering of those resources. They have also joined hands with the influential quarters and turned the forests into their private fiefdom for plundering their wealth.

The government must act fast and also with a heavy hand to save the forests and coastal greenbelt in order to avert massive ecological and environmental disasters.

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Obama's dire tire decision raises China's ire

While China needs the US, it is growing more assertive. It is hard for China to take the slap without a whimper. Obama will have a lot of work to do to smooth China's raised hackles.

EDITORIAL DESK (THE CHINA POST)

BARACK Obama's decision to slap punitive tariffs on Chinese tires for automobiles and light trucks is certain to draw China's ire. It was an ill-advised move at a wrong time, and it could backfire against him if he fails to do some damage control. Late in the evening of September 11, the White House issued a brief, low-key announcement on the president's decision to impose a 35% tariff on tires imported from China, by invoking a rarely-used section of a trade law which allows US industries and labour unions to seek protection from "surges" of Chinese imports that would "disrupt" US businesses.

Beijing's response was unusually swift and strong. "China is firmly opposed to this measure of commercial protectionism by US," the Ministry of Commerce said on September 13. "China reserves the right to take responsive actions to firmly protect the interests of Chinese companies." Although the ministry was vague about the "responsive actions," subsequent news reports said US chicken and auto parts sold to China could be targeted.

Obama's decision showed that Sino-US relations are indeed "complex," as once

aptly described by former secretary of state Condi Rice. Obama is anything but anti-China, who will meet Chinese President Hu Jintao in New York Tuesday, and again at the G20 summit in Pittsburgh, where leaders of the world's largest industrialised and emerging economies will gather to discuss ways of tackling the global economic downturn. US president is also slated to pay a state visit to China in November to cement US ties with China.

But Obama often has to make difficult decisions and this one was especially hard as union leaders and protectionists in Congress were pressuring him to "stand up" to "enforce our trade law." The AFL-CIO supported him during the campaign, and Obama needs their support in his fight for health care reform. Unlike president Bush who vetoed four such petitions that reached his desk, Obama faces pressures that his predecessor could afford to brush off.

Even so, his first major decision on foreign trade was a mistake. It is protectionist, blatant and unmistakable. It is against his own principles and promise that he had pledged unequivocally at previous G20 powwows and other occasions that protectionism must be resisted and defeated for the sake of free and liberal trade. Now,

however, these high-sounding words suddenly ring hollow.

When Bush nixed such petitions endorsed by the International Trade Commission, he cited America's national interest. Obama should also have such courage in leadership, for many reasons. First, imported Chinese tires are mostly low-end products for millions of ordinary consumers who benefit from the cheaper goods.

Second, higher tariffs for tires would not be of much help for American jobs or economy.

On the other hand, the move could open a Pandora's box for other sectors of the manufacturing industry to follow suit. They are indeed impacted by "surges" of low-cost Chinese imports. If Obama does not handle the issue wisely, it could lead to a trade war that nobody wants. Understandably, Obama's move was aimed at assuaging his political supporters. But the price was too high. His leadership and credibility suffered a severe drubbing.

It may be argued that enforcing America's trade law should not be faulted. But there are other considerations of greater importance-- national economic interest and national political interest. America's economic recovery from the global recession needs China's help in buying more US Treasury bills and debt. A large sliver of China's trade surplus with US, which totalled US\$103 billion in the first half of this year, is invested in dollar-denominated US debt and assets.

Besides, Obama's move also carries

adverse political consequences. China's billion-strong netizens are angry and demanding their government to retaliate. Nationalistic feelings could be dangerous and damaging if left unchecked. In slapping the punitive tax, there should be proof of dumping or flagrant unfair trading practices as stipulated in the rules of the World Trade Organization. But the trade law invoked by Obama does not burden US with such proof. No wonder it has incurred the wrath of China.

In the past decade or so, Sino-US relations have been growing stronger and more interdependent, despite some occasional spats. When Obama took office in January, he upgraded the regular, ministerial-level strategic economic dialogue with China to an even higher echelon.

Obama knows that America needs an ally to tackle a host of thorny global issues-- war on terror, climate change, nuclear non-proliferation in Iran and North Korea, the list goes on and on.

China, on its part, is the world's third largest economy and the largest exporter. Its near double-digit growth in the past three decades was largely fuelled by exports to the US. While China needs the US, it is growing more assertive. It is hard for China to take the slap without a whimper. Obama will have a lot of work to do to smooth China's raised hackles.

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