

EC's welcome move

Political parties should back it up in their own interest

THE election commission's decision to revisit and amend provisions of the Representation of People Order (RPO) that relate to default on bank loans and payment of utility bills is a move in the right direction. We recall that in a climate of heightened public consciousness for reform of electoral rules, the EC had brought the first amendment to the RPO with a six-month provision for rescheduling loans and payment of backlog bills.

But it had to soon bend backwards and dilute the provision to the extent of reducing the stipulation to seven days only in which to reschedule their loans and pay up utility bills to qualify for election. The EC had to compromise there to respond to a strong demand from the political parties for relaxation.

Under very special circumstances, this perhaps was sought to be rationalised, though not with any unassailable reasoning that it was just a one-off accommodation. For, election after election, big defaulters of bank loans and utility bills had managed an easy sail through the elections by paying a token installment up-front at first and then repay over staggered schedules. The net result has been continuation of default culture and dwindling public confidence in the credibility of the MPs as lawmakers.

Now, therefore, it is in the fitness of things that the EC is drafting a rule to provide a six-month timeframe in the RPO to allow defaulters to reschedule loans and pay up arrear bills to be eligible for candidature. It is also good to learn that suppression of information while filing applications for candidacy will make one liable for disqualification.

The EC has naturally decided to engage all political parties in a dialogue and consultative process for the sake of carrying out an appropriate amendment to the RPO. This is very close to the heart of the electorate. We believe that it's in the interest of the political parties and a vibrant democracy that they lend full support to the EC's initiative to bear fruit.

Moon holds out fresh hope

Scope for peaceful use of space widens

THE moon is perhaps opening up new a vista of possibilities. A recent lunar space mission Chandrayaan-1 launched by India has, with its state-of-the-art instruments, found strong evidence of water in the moon's soil. Analysis has further shown that it is possible to extract a litre of water from a cubic metre of the moon's soil. This fresh finding that corroborates earlier results and speculations has bolstered space scientists' dream of carrying out space missions deeper into the solar system and even beyond from their future base on the moon.

The importance of water on any celestial body other than earth has always been a subject of great speculation and interest. That is simply because water and life go together. Water is important not just for any planet or its satellite within or without the solar system to host life in any of its forms. Existence of water anywhere beyond the earth is of prime concern also for reasons of sustainability of manned missions there. From that point of view, any concrete proof that water exists in our nearest celestial object, the moon, is great news for the entire mankind, let alone for the space scientists.

After the first US manned space mission to the moon in 1969, scientists' interest in sending further manned probes there gradually died down, if only for the astronomical costs those involved. Now the scientists will have more justifications in favour of such costs, once the moon itself turns into a resource base for onward space missions supplying water for man's sustenance as well as rocket fuel, hydrogen and oxygen, from the same lunar soil.

A word of caution may not be out of place here, especially against the backdrop of our Cold War experience of superpower rivalry over military use of the space. Though at the moment that cold war nightmare is history, there should still be no room for complacency even in a multi-polar world given the proclivity for acquiring nuclear weapons and their delivery technology by many new aspirants of recent origin.

The old big powers and the newly emerging ones like India and China have therefore a big stake in ensuring that the pristine moon may not turn into an object of future rivalry among them in the future.

As in the case of space, we are for peaceful use of the moon for carrying out further exploration into space. We are for keeping the moon forever as a shining spot of hope and dream in the sky.

Accessing safe drinking water

It is time we took our access to drinking water seriously. The only way to move forward is to enhance consumer awareness. It is also important that our concerned authorities be forced to take responsibility for water-borne diseases being linked to poor water quality.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

EVERY August, over the last four years, I have been participating in the World Water Week convened by Swedish authorities in Stockholm. I have been doing so in my capacity as Vice President of the Bangladesh Water Partnership. This has provided me with the opportunity to appreciate different facets associated with fresh water usage—production, access, delivery and storage. The annual conference has also expanded my vision regarding non-navigational uses of international watercourses and the importance of water within the context of climate variability. Different sessions have also underlined the significance of a sustainable environment and integrity within the water network.

This year was another learning experience. There was an intensive discussion on different aspects related to drinking water consumption. Professor Kenneth M. Persson, an engineer from Lund University, Sweden opened many windows in this regard.

I took special interest on this topic because of the drinking water situation in Bangladesh, especially in its urban environment. Usable drinking water is the most basic requirement for human survival and yet probably one of the most neglected in terms of assuring accessibility, safety and selection of sources. The state of affairs is further compounded because of unreliable service conditions that sometimes force inhabitants to employ alternative providers or arrange for less sanitary long-term storage of water in household tanks. Distrust of municipal water quality has also led to relying on expensive bottled water.

It would be an oversimplification to state that water is essential not only for meeting vital human needs but also for addressing poverty, economic development, health and hygiene. This however presupposes the development of integrated management of water resources.

Water has been described as the only food item that a human being needs daily. WHO in 2003 recommended domestic

water managers to design a per capita water supply of more than 100 liters per day of tap water to consumers in order to allow the consumer a healthy, hygienic and pleasant life. This figure would be higher if John Anthony Allan's 'virtual water' calculations were to be followed. It may be mentioned here that virtual water calculations sum up all the water needed for producing all commodities that we use—like clothing and food besides the actual water intake.

Water quality demands vary with where the water is consumed and for which end use the water is directed. This factor has led to national guidelines and standards being developed in different countries according to its socio-cultural, environmental and economic conditional requirements. In 1982, WHO published its "Guidelines for Drinking Water Quality". Unfortunately, it is rarely observed, especially in the developing countries. Resource constraints and lack of sufficient technical personnel are commonly given as excuses.

In the EU, the concept of water quality is very well defined in the European Council Directive 98/83/EC of 3 November 1998. Its objective is to protect human health from the adverse effects of any contamination of water intended for human consumption. This is done by ensuring that the water is clean and wholesome. Acceptable drinking water has to be free from microorganisms and parasites and from any substances, which in numbers or concentration constitute a potential danger to human health. It also has to be within specific minimum requirements pertaining to microbiological, physical and chemical parameters.

Compared to this, any examination of water delivered in the cities of Bangladesh by the Water and Sewerage Authority will indicate, more likely than not, failure in meeting consistent standards. The public perception is that our water quality is poor and more often than not the principal cause for different health problems. Organic and inorganic substances as well as chemical content, most of the time, affect water's transparency, its odour and its taste. Those in charge of management of



Water woes.

our water delivery has argued that the quality of water at the tap point suffers not because of their failure in preparing the water for consumption but because of run down water delivery pipe systems. Such a defence is totally unacceptable.

I think time has come for us to create a Drinking Water Consumers Association which can be charged with the responsibility of monitoring drinking water as delivered in different parts of our cities. There needs to be regular laboratory inspections and if the quality is found wanting, those in charge of production and delivery should be taken to task. To me, providing contaminated water for drinking is a violation of my fundamental rights.

In recent times we have seen the emergence of the bottled water industry in Bangladesh. This is consistent with the global trend and has grown out of the psychological fear that water available from taps are not fit for consumption without further treatment (boiling or filtration). With this, we share the habit of many others both in the developed world (Italy, Belgium, France, Spain and Mexico) and also in the developing world.

Unfortunately, even in this sector we are behind the others in terms of regulatory commitment. Greed seems to have taken over and has led to the discovery of dishonest producers marketing bottled water in Bangladesh which do not meet the stated requirements. Some even take water straight from the tap and then bottle and sell it as boiled and filtered water. This is partially due to the fact that our monitoring mechanism is faulty.

It is time we took our access to drinking water seriously. The only way to move

forward is to enhance consumer awareness. It is also important that our concerned authorities be forced to take responsibility for water-borne diseases being linked to poor water quality. An affected consumer should be able to take the related agency or producer (in cases of bottled water) to Court for indemnification for loss caused. Such a scenario will then ensure that complaints are addressed and measures taken to redress the situation.

We have a serious situation in our hands. The matter has become more complex because of the fast depletion of our ground-water resource base (leading to fall of water tables in aquifers) and the paucity of water treatment plants. The daily demand for potable water in Dhaka and Narayanganj now stands at about 2.1 billion liters against a supply of about 1.9 billion liters. It was only 60 million liters in 1970. This has necessitated the sinking of 523 deep tube wells; this figure was only 47 in 1970. This over-extraction of ground water and less recharge from sealing of surface soil has made things more intricate.

Our LGRD Ministry in conjunction with the LGED will have to give serious attention to this issue in its entirety. A comprehensive approach needs to be undertaken. It will require major financial outlay and infrastructural overhaul. One way might be to raise funds by privatising this important utility sector. This will, in all probability, also usher in accountability and desired transparency. Time is of the essence.

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Migration to Dhaka

The growth of consumer materialism, which allows the principal cities and other urban centres to overlook social ills, can prove to be too costly for the whole country.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

MILLIONS of people are now leaving their poor rural surroundings, once the hub of their dreams and aspirations, for the lights, action and glimmer of opportunities that big cities of the country seem to offer. The lure of that apparently happy crowd has transformed the cities, once sleepy towns or manageable urban centres, into bursting human hives. From Dhaka to Chittagong and even to Khulna, there is no turning back.

These changes within the two principal cities, Dhaka and Chittagong, have come with an awesome swiftness that has caught the already laggard administration unprepared. The capital city of Dhaka, that was designed to accommodate 10 lakh people at best in the '60s, now teems with more than 100 million people — with a population density of 10,000 persons per sq km according to statistics revealed by the press.

Now there are as many as 3.5 lakh mechanised vehicles plying on the city streets, choking the city in blue noxious fumes that are highly hazardous to health. Dhaka city has only 220 km primary roads, but automobiles in the capital lined up bumper to bumper in single file would stretch longer than this. The city is suffering serious growing pains. There is hardly any single decent sidewalk or pavement for people to walk on. Shockingly true, the pedestrians in the city seem to be hunted animals.

New arrivals are pouring in at the rate of 5 lakh a year. With each new wave come greater problems. Half of Dhaka city's people are under 22, and almost all of them without jobs. Almost 45 percent of the population are slum dwellers, with about 4 to 6 persons, most of them underage, living in one room in ramshackle sheds made of plastic sheets and crate lumber.

In recent times, because of climatic disruption, things have taken a very horrifying turn. River erosion victims from Rangpur, Gaibandha, Nilphamari, and Aila and Sidr-affected people from Barisal, Barguna, Patuakhali, Bagerhat and Satkhira, are coming to Dhaka for a living. Many of them live in makeshift slums in different locations of the city.

The migration has been spurred not so much by rural restlessness as by catastrophes like droughts, untimely floods, cyclones and loss of farm land and houses by river erosion and, last of all, famine-like conditions in the rural areas because of the absence of a job market in those areas. With

a quarter of a million pavement dwellers and the quota of the poor, Dhaka city epitomises the country's urban nightmare and bitter poverty. Tourists may marvel at the city's gleaming glass skyscrapers or admire the modern high-rise apartments in certain locations of the city, but the average family income is a horrid \$1 a day for most of the workforce.

Even a relatively prosperous life on the farms, and determined government efforts to prevent rural migration, have not dimmed the lure of the cities. It is on record that to stem the exodus from South Korea's countryside, Park Chung Hee, the then president of South Korea, initiated a series of economic incentives to keep people in agricultural work.

Analysis suggests that incentives for farm activities in Bangladesh during the last two decades have been disappointingly low as a consequence of non-availability of subsidies in the form of fertiliser, irrigation facilities and price protection. Farmlands, on the other hand, have given way to shrimp farms in large areas of greater Khulna, Satkhira, Bagerhat, Barisal and Chittagong, benefiting only a few landlords. More so, price stabilisation and price support to rice, potato, pulses, sugar cane and vegetables at the growers' level have been alarmingly non-existent.

This brought in its wake ominous consequences in the form of severe commodity shortage and price spiral in the recent past. The government, after very careful consideration, proposed creation of a sizeable agricultural subsidy fund to boost production in view of the food shortage the country underwent immediately after its takeover. The measure, it is believed, would go a long way in relieving the distress of the rural populace dependent on farm activities.

The present government must learn the bitter truth from the previous government's neglect in giving priority to agricultural production. Shockingly, the past governments in the last two decades hardly took any measures to create growth centres beyond the city limits. In many ways the cities are self-feeding monsters, perpetuating their own growth in some selected areas by devouring the country's resources. Dhaka perhaps controls about 70% of the country's money supply. Of the country's capital investment, more than 60 percent is invested in Dhaka and Chittagong. Most of the other cities and the vast rural landscape remain brazenly neglected.

This discrimination, even after construction of the lamuna bridge, connectine



Piling in by the thousands!

Dhaka and Chittagong with North Bengal, continues to create a great imbalance in income generation of the districts. This sort of pathetic neglect has given rise to tensions and mounting discontent that tend to bedevil the good works done in some selected areas. All told, this unrelenting exodus to cities can hardly be stopped, even by draconian measures, because of the condition of the rural surroundings remain much neglected.

Dr. Sarwar Jahan, professor and head of URP department, Buet, in a recent interview with *Prothom Alo*, stressed the need for stopping migration to Dhaka city to save the city from the all-pervading squalour and chaos. This can only be realised by implementing the proposed "one house, one farm" policy in rural Bangladesh.

With mass migration going unabated and the number of vehicles steadily increasing, Dhaka's skyline is covered with soot. The noxious black fumes from the city's dilapidated buses, trucks and three wheelers have turned the city into a dark, slate-grey maze, exposing the city dwellers to dire health hazards. Along with this, the city streets appear to be a human sea that moves in massive tidal surges. People breathe this foul air almost without complaining, and eat the adulterated food of all varieties because there is hardly any way to know what they are eating. Most city dwellers, while traveling on the roads or eating food, vegetables and fruits sold in the market, are not even aware of the hazards they pose, or that some insensible and avaricious businessmen are poisoning them day in and day out.

Pathetically, there has hardly been any effort to stop this menacing advance of enhancing wealth through such sinister means, other than the drives that a team of BSTI officials and judicial magistrates have launched in recent times to put an end to this menacing trade of killing people by producing and marketing adulterated food

items. The ills, squalour, poverty and crime in the dying Dhaka city have frustrated the people's hopes and aspirations of a happy and healthy life.

It is worth mentioning that Singapore's vaunted cleanliness was achieved by effective administrative action. To discard a cigarette stub or chewing gum on the street is to invite a heavy fine. Almost everything in that city runs with computerised precision. Priority in admission to primary schools is given to those having a family of two children. The generation that remembers poverty, however, considers Singapore's modernisation as nothing less than a miracle. Could we at least try to attain a standard near the level Singapore has achieved?

Shockingly, the way that the city's inhabitants, with indulgence from the administration, have been fouling the air and polluting city streets and surroundings defeats all hope of bringing about a change in the quality of life, efficiency, and dynamism in the working populace. City dwellers are painfully aware that, along with other difficulties, hospitals and schools are overcrowded — with community services deteriorating, drug use proliferating and crime and violence escalating to an all-time high.

The fear lurking in many minds is that the present urban conditions can easily breed frustration, which may spawn social violence. And the stark fact is that we are witnessing these pathetic developments in our everyday life. The growth of consumer materialism, which allows the principal cities and other urban centres to overlook social ills, can prove to be too costly for the whole country. At the same time, if the cities are allowed to grow at the expense of the rural villages, the cost may be too high.

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