

Push to save river campaign

Govt decision to go for an allout eviction drive welcome

IT is good to see that the government is being relentless in its pursuit of reclaiming rivers around the city from the clutches of grabbers and the polluting hands of industries. The heightening concern over moribund rivers that this paper brought to the centre of national discourse only a few months back, the government at the highest level responding to it and judicial activism demanding action -- all seem in place to bolster the massive campaign for river reclamation beginning with Dhaka and taken forward all over the country.

The high powered task force committee on river recovery in its first meeting has directed the deputy commissioners of Dhaka and four surrounding districts to survey and demarcate the rivers Buriganga, Shitalakkhya, Balu and Turag by November 30 in compliance with HC directives. Meanwhile, on the basis of available data on illegal occupation, the government is to launch an eviction drive in and around the capital city in ten days' time.

Eviction, survey, demarcation, further freeing of lands from grabbers and laying of public pavements along the banks by way of protecting the banks and consolidating government control of public assets are important components of the river reclamation campaign. Another equally important task is to have the effluent discharging industries around the city comply with environmental standards of setting up effluent treatment plants. Then, there is the obligation on the part of hospitals and clinics to refrain from dumping wastes anywhere and everywhere. All these requirements are to be fulfilled under strict supervision of designated authorities and in a state of coordination and synchronisation.

Freeing the rivers from the grabbers and different polluting agents will bring multiple benefits to the nation. It will not only ensure navigability and better communication, ease water-logging and flooding, help buttress pure water supplies, but also conserve the environment by injecting life into dying rivers.

The survival and advancement of Dhaka city is critically dependent on saving the rivers and unless the degradation of the river resource is arrested here and now, the damages may be irreparable. So, the emphasis ought to be not only on a sense of purpose but also on a time-bound action plan. For it is still possible to restore the rivers to life as some of the once-afflicted cities on river banks in the world have proven. The examples are before us to guide us in our collective mission.

Rising fatality at ship-breaking yards

Urgent steps needed to improve security at workplace

DEATHS of workers during ship-breaking are gradually on the rise. According to newspaper reports, in the last two days, four workers died at the ship-breaking yard of Sitakunda in Chittagong. Added to three other casualties under similar circumstances, the death figure comes to seven within the span of only a week at three different ship-breaking yards of Sitakunda. In all the cases, the ill-fated labourers either inhaled poisonous gas or they were crushed under heavy metal plates.

Such deaths during ship-breaking activities have not also occurred for the first time. In fact, death of workers is, as it were, an accepted fact of life at the ship-breaking spots of the country. Small wonder, after the casualties occur, one hears no more about the victims and their families or about any measures, if any, to compensate the victims' families for the loss they suffered. Worse still, as far as our knowledge goes, one hardly ever comes across reports of any measures taken by the ship-breakers to ensure safety of workers at the workplace or to improve the condition of work to guard against similar deaths in the future.

Such deaths at the ship-breaking spots are extremely shocking. For it is not that owners of the ship-breaking business are unaware of the causes that lead to the fatalities. For at the designated yards, the workers, who are not adequately equipped with necessary safety gears, are exposed to the toxic cargoes the scrap ships carry. The workers recruited for the job, too, are often inexperienced. And they are also not cautioned about the risk their work involves.

The sad consequence of this glaring indifference to the lives of the ship-breaking workers is that the casualty figures are rising with every passing day. Neither the business involved, nor the government seem seized of the reality that the ship-breaking yards have, meanwhile, turned into a veritable death trap for the workers. And at the same time, the country's shores, too, have become a dumping ground for the scrap ships carrying all sorts of hazard.

In the circumstances, the government should take serious note of the rising rate of fatality at the ship-breaking yards and ensure that workers are not forced to work under life-threatening conditions. Apart from improving security at the workplace and the condition of work, there should also be arrangements for sufficiently compensating the families of the victims.

Promoting liberalism with medieval mindset

What we need is adequate provision of witness protection and victim support in the criminal justice administration. To make those effective we need a large injection of governmental funds. Any further delay will only swell the ranks of summary-justice seekers and the admirers of vigilante action.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE honourable shipping minister is not the first democratically elected person to speak on the virtues of summary killing, extra-judicial deaths or the deaths in the so-called crossfire. Not very long ago, our minister in charge of foreign affairs very poignantly indicated the difficulties of suddenly coming out of the clutches of crossfire killings. She was saying so after returning from an international forum in Geneva where she assured the audience about Bangladesh's firm resolve to put an effective stop to the extra-judicial killings.

It is only a few days now that the former general, and long time ruler of Bangladesh, Hussain Muhammad Ershad, has appreciated the usefulness of crossfire killings by decrying the failure of the criminal justice system to punish the hardened criminals and bring relief to the suffering members of public.

The dilemma of our socio-political existence is brought home by the reality that while those wishing to see the effective writ of the rule of law are continuously

pointing to the un-tenability of extra-judicial deaths as an acceptable socio-legal response, there is no dearth of supporters or admirers of such apparently abominable method. Random eliciting of opinions by newspapers has shown that a large majority of people entertain the view that the deplorable slide in crime and order can gradually be stalled by resorting to extra-judicial killings.

It is time, therefore, to do some serious introspection and find out how we have arrived at such a lugubrious scenario. The seriousness of the matter is warranted by the fact that if extra-judicial killings succeed in even implicitly acquiring the seal of approval, then there remains no justification to maintaining and supporting a justice system at public expense. The question is, how low shall we stoop and offend the democratic sensibilities?

Shall not our present predicament compel us to examine and find out if the working of various institutions in the criminal justice system were interfered with and not allowed to do their due? Such premonition cannot be summarily dismissed in our situation where crime, criminality and

criminals could not be dealt with in an objective and professional manner.

It is not too late if we decide to set our house in order and behave as a civilized society. For that to happen, the responsible persons in the corridors of power have to exercise due diligence and act earnestly to uphold the rule of law. That is not a tall order.

The question is, do we want sustained laborious action under the law to strengthen our democratic foundation, or do we need rash desperate action without the cover of law? The crossfire actions, undoubtedly, do not fit in with the first proposition. We need to be absolutely clear about that.

The ultimate punishment in the alleged 'crossfire' -- about whose credibility many are not convinced -- appear as summary response from desperate executive of law enforcement. The legality of actions leading to such extreme action aside, any responsible citizen might like to know if, in our often over-zealous anti-crime operations, we are just treating the symptoms without venturing to study and assess the objective conditions promoting criminality. We do not need sociologists and criminologist to tell us that present-day crime is a complex social phenomenon caused by a multiplicity of factors, and determining culpability is an extremely mind-exacting task.

Everyday life experience tells us that quite often, the fun-seeking delinquent of yesteryears turns into the uncontrollable don of the day, due to the patronage of

powerful quarters and the unexplained inaction of the enforcement outfit. Therefore, when deaths occur in the so-called 'crossfire', some myopic elements may be satisfied but a civilized society, which wishes to live by the canons of law, cannot but be concerned. The alleged deaths in 'crossfire' are forestalling the benefits of thorough investigations from which citizens could have known the pathetic, and yet compelling, factors behind the growth and maturing of criminals, the shady role of the patrons and the alleged inertia of the regulatory units.

What we need is adequate provision of witness protection and victim support in the criminal justice administration. To make those effective we need a large injection of governmental funds. Any further delay will only swell the ranks of summary-justice seekers and the admirers of vigilante action. The decapitating adversity of the victims of crime demand mainstream support of the system.

The rule of law and criminal jurisprudence may appear to be unequivocally in favour of the offenders, the criminals, the law-breakers, and the accused persons. That does not automatically give a license to resort to illegal measures because a civilized government must earnestly strive to demonstrate that law-enforcement effectiveness and civil liberties can co-exist in a society governed by the rule of law. We cannot defend a liberal principle by reviving a medieval prejudice.

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The Lisbon Treaty has taken a step forward

The European Union cannot afford protracted uncertainty and stalemate over its legal basis, given the many urgent internal and external challenges it faces. This includes decisions pertaining to the composition of the next European Commission, since the current college's mandate expires on October 31-- as does that of High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THE Irish 'Yes' to the Lisbon Treaty has been good news for Europe.

The fact that two-thirds of the Irish electorate voted in favour -- and with a higher turnout than when the 'No' camp prevailed in June 2008 (58% versus 53%) -- is being seen as an important step towards the treaty's entry into force. A second Irish 'No' might have killed it off and conveyed to both European citizens and the wider world the image of a union that cannot get its act together and deliver on what it agrees upon. Ireland's "resounding yes" to Lisbon can now be viewed as a much-needed turning point after almost a decade of failed institutional reforms. It will assist in the creation of conditions for a much better union.

This strong endorsement of the Lisbon treaty by the Irish after eight years of divisive attempts has also sparked off the jockeying for position over the plum jobs that it will create.

Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair's interest in becoming president of the EU has been Europe's worst-kept secret for more than a year. He is a clear favourite ahead of Jan-Peter Balkenende, the Dutch prime minister, Paavo Lipponen, the former Finnish premier, Felipe Gonzalez, the former Spanish leader, and Jean-Claude Juncker, the veteran Luxembourg prime minister. However, there appears to be several procedural obstacles that need to

be crossed before this can take place. It will take time, require support of re-elected Chancellor Merkel and also, the completion of some other important steps. This will stem not only from the very nature of the process but will also include resolution of the question as to the powers of the new president of the EU, compared to the expanded role of high representative.

Following the Irish 'Yes', 26 EU members have now successfully completed the ratification process. Until last week, it was pending in Poland, but after the Irish vote, the treaty has been ratified there. However, the treaty's entry into force is by no means immediately certain. Ratification is still pending in one member state: the Czech Republic.

The situation is far more complex in Prague. Czech President Vaclav Klaus openly opposes the Lisbon Treaty and has persistently refused to sign it, despite the fact that both the lower Czech chamber (in February 2009) and the upper Czech house (in May 2009) have approved the text. He has declared that he will await the outcome of the ratification process in all other EU member states. It is now being presumed that the Irish and (most likely) Polish decisions will increase the pressure on him to sign -- although his reaction to such influence remains unpredictable at this stage. He might still reiterate that he will await the final verdict of the constitutional court with regard to cases pertaining to the Lisbon Treaty filed in this forum in Prague. The

Czech president, unhappy with Brussels, might also use the existing political instability card at home (the country is being run by a caretaker administration) and plead that he will have to await the outcome of the next elections before signing the treaty.

I have pointed out the existing difficulties so that readers understand that the high enthusiasm created through the Irish vote does not mean that the treaty is home and dry and that Blair will be 'President of the EU' within days.

In fact, if it is not ratified by all 27 member states before the next UK elections (also due by June 2010), the Lisbon Treaty could face a more substantial risk. David Cameron, the leader of the British conservatives -- likely to win the election -- has already declared his intention to hold a referendum on the treaty if it has not yet entered into force. A negative outcome to any such vote appears an almost foregone conclusion.

However, it is clear that the European Union cannot afford protracted uncertainty and stalemate over its legal basis, given the many urgent internal and external challenges it faces. This includes decisions pertaining to the composition of the next European Commission, since the current college's mandate expires on October 31-- as does that of High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana. It would be important to remember here that the size and shape of the former and the competences of the latter will be different depending on whether they are appointed on the basis of Nice or Lisbon. Such a unique situation will require a combination of resolve and flexibility from all sides.

In the meantime, the current Swedish EU presidency has not been sitting idle. They have begun working on a multi-pronged approach ahead of the forthcoming European Council meeting on October 29-30. There is a possibility that this council session might extend the current commission's mandate by up to two months, in

order to buy some time and allow for the nomination of the new college. The fact that President Barroso has been confirmed for another five-year term should make this easier. This will enable the commission to be seen not simply as a lame-duck caretaker body.

Secondly, the European Council could appoint Mr. Solana's successor straight away and also decide that, as a consequence, his/her country will not have a commissioner until the Lisbon Treaty enters into force. When that happens, the 'new high representative will join the commission as vice-president and oversee the union's 'foreign policy,' in compliance with the Lisbon Treaty. Such a mechanism would allow for the nomination and organization of the new college, which may consist of the president and 25 commissioners. It would, thus, still be in line with Nice (fewer commissioners than member states), but also easily adaptable to Lisbon.

President Barroso could subsequently submit details of his new commission to the European parliament for the required hearings in the relevant committees, which could start in mid-to-late November. In the meantime, and up until the December 2009 EU summit, the European council and the parliament could remain in close contact to be able to agree quickly on switching to a Lisbon-based 'script' -- including the final vote of confirmation on the entire commission -- if and when circumstances allow. This could be done either by written procedure (as happened over President Barroso's appointment) or by convening a snap extraordinary summit to set the date for the new treaty's entry into force, and adopting the required formal steps.

Only then will it be possible to enter into the final stage where a semi-permanent president of the European council can be appointed and regulations introduced to enhance the efficiency, transparency and legitimacy of the enlarged EU.

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OPINION

Whither politics of change?

ABU IMRAN

THE present government came to power with the slogan 'Din Badaler Pala' -- as if a qualitative change in the lives of Bangladeshi men and women will follow. But the government's performance during the last nine months, sadly, has been disappointing. A brief outline of its performance follows.

The home minister, if I remember correctly, said the law and order situation had improved. Strange. I do not know what barometer she used to measure this rosy picture, as the practical situation is completely different. Crime, murder, highjackings, toll collections, extra judicial-killings, etc., have risen. Whether one opens a newspaper page, or listens to the TV and radio, hardly a day passes where such unfortunate news are not reported.

People expected that with all the pre-election assurances, prices of essentials would reasonably decrease or be controlled. But the government has failed miserably. According to the daily Sangram's lead news on September 27, prices of various items during the last nine months have gone from 3% to 180% up.

Regrettably, instead of taking remedial measures, the commerce minister made some uncalled for remarks. If I remember correctly, he said he could not penalise businessmen for not bringing down prices.

Commonly, for any failure, the government should take appropriate action. If it does not, then who will? Did the commerce minister mean people should take action themselves? Perhaps this could never be the intention of any government. Such uncalled for remarks embolden unscrupulous businessmen to go unchecked in raising prices since they know no one will punish them.

It is relevant to recall a historical fact about price control. Perhaps there was a similar situation in India when a Muslim king, Alauddin Khilji, was the ruler. To ensure price control, as one of the measures, he proclaimed that those who gave less in weight would be punished by their flesh being cut to the deficient amount to make good the loss. That was a penal measure and he did not hesitate to take that action in the public interest. What holds back our commerce minister from ignoring the public interest and allowing business people to be successful is not

understandable.

The load shedding problem is inherent. Agreed. It is the sitting government's duty to improve the situation. If the situation cannot be improved, the government should at least maintain the level it inherited. But sadly, the energy supply level has gone down surpassing the level maintained by all previous governments. The supply has decreased to a height that has multiplied the sufferings of the public. Earlier a responsible person in government said that during the month of Ramadan, particularly at Iftar and Taravi, load-shedding would be checked. But a wide gap appeared between what he said and what actually occurred. I do not know about other places, but in our area, Azimpur, it happened.

Traffic jam is another area where deterioration has peaked. Earlier, due to traffic jams, it took half an hour to go from one place to another. Now, sometimes, it takes around an hour or more for the same distance. A few days back, I made an appointment to see a doctor. I boarded a rickshaw with enough time in hand, but, after covering some distance, the rickshaw stopped moving due to a huge traffic jam. I waited for some time but there was no sign of de-

jamming soon. Expecting to miss the appointment, I got off and walked the rest of the way. Someone else might already have suffered like me. The problem has become so acute that the government, according to the news, has thought of and rescheduled office times. What good that will bring, I do not know. But it surely speaks of the gravity and urgency of the matter warranting solution.

India's commissioning of the Tipaimukh dam project will bring disaster to Bangladesh. This is the opinion of not only common people but also experts and technocrats. When H.E. P.R. Chakarvarty, the High Commissioner of India to Bangladesh termed our experts on the Tipaimukh issue as "the so-called experts," the government took little action against him for his undiplomatic behaviour, although people widely protested it. This was nothing short of diplomatic failure.

The failures listed above of the present government overrides its successes, if any. And if failures connote "Din Badaler Pala," or politics of change, then ordinary men and women can only pity their wisdom.

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