

PM's directive on eviction of river grabbers

It should be followed to the hilt under strict monitoring

WE commend the prime minister for her consistent and relentless pursuit to free the rivers and wetlands of illegal occupants and polluters. Reflecting a shared sense of urgency, she has been persistent with her directives to all concerned to reclaim the rivers from the hands grabbers and polluters kindling fresh hopes for a revitalisation of the city's life line that the rivers are.

There is no denying that periodical drive to shoo away the illegal occupants is not enough. Many of the wetlands in and around Dhaka as well as the major rivers serving the capital have been filled up under the nose of corrupt officials. And those who have indulged in these illegal acts in violation of specific laws and orders of the government are culpable for the great harm they have and are causing to the environment, and as a consequence, to the people.

How often have we seen the encroachers resuming their occupation very soon after they were evacuated, making a mockery of any half-hearted eviction drive. And there is much truth in the PM's statement that there was collusion between the authorities who have turned a blind eye to these damaging activities when our environment was being destroyed by some crooked and dishonest people.

Not only are the canals and rivers vanishing, those that exist are also being so badly polluted that it has rendered their water unfit for use by either humans or the fish and marine life. In fact, if anything, many species of river fish are disappearing because of unchecked disgorging of effluents and wastes from the industries.

What we need now is a compliance with PM's directives and a strict monitoring of their implementation. What must be kept in mind is that the task is a huge one that would require coordinated action of all relevant agencies. It would also require increase in manpower of these departments so that a continuous monitoring of the areas can be put into effect along with the recovery operation.

We suggest that a list of priority areas be drawn up and reclamation action be initiated in a systematic way. But it is just not enough to free the lands and rivers and wetlands. Not only must those responsible be taken to court they must be made to bear the cost of reclaiming the land also. Given that many of the offenders are rich and well linked, the PM's directive, that no one however influential should be spared, must be followed in full.

Dipping political rhetoric

We need real change here

ONLY on Saturday BNP chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia's decision to boycott the anti-poverty rally after she had given to understand that she would attend it drew criticism from us through these columns. In fact, it has drawn flak from different quarters for obvious reasons. It was a missed opportunity to see the two top leaders on the same podium, addressing an area of common concern.

Understandably, the last-minute change of her mind put a damper on the rally organised to create a broad consensus on the strategies and tactics of fighting poverty. It was an absolutely apolitical issue which should have been left out of the narrow ambit of political rhetoric.

But today we are constrained to say that we are left dismayed at Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's caustic and uncalled for remark at the leader of the opposition from the podium that perhaps she would have attended the rally if its theme were "loot property, get rich", instead of its being "national unity to prevent poverty".

People have already expressed their displeasure with Begum Zia's decision. This is evident from newspaper reports and editorials. But the prime minister took it upon herself to berate the opposition leader in words that were, to say the least, indiscreet and not behooving her position as prime minister. It has taken political rhetoric to an abyss.

She could have left it to the people to decide whether the leader of the opposition's boycott of the rally, especially at the last-minute was justified or not. Taking such a stand would have been enough to put the message across.

While the BNP chief failed to rise above parochial thinking, even when an issue like poverty alleviation was being addressed, the prime minister, for her part, relied on derisive rhetoric to hit back at her adversary, this only widening the chasm.

It is this rhetoric that has to undergo substantial change to make politics less virulent in our context. While carefully crafted and nicely delivered speeches are known to have highly salubrious effects on political culture, indiscreet and outlandish utterances can upset everything. Rhetoric is a weapon in a politician's armoury but carrying it beyond certain limits has its hazards too. And relying solely on it can be disastrous!

Who is minding our highways?

The global experts are of the opinion that road accidents are both predictable and preventable. What is needed to combat this life-threatening malaise is improving road conditions, patrolling of highways in high-speed cars, creating greater public awareness and strict implementation of traffic laws to instill discipline in both drivers and passersby.



SHAHNOOR WAHID

ON Sunday, a physician and an engineer died in a road crash along with one or two more passengers. The tragic incident occurred on the Faridpur-Bhanga road when a young girl suddenly bolted before the cruising car on her way to the other side. Even at normal speed on a highway it would be impossible for any driver to save either the person in the middle of the road or the car from meeting with a fatal accident under such circumstances. Who will take the responsibility of these deaths?

The inevitable has happened in this case leading to the deaths of some valuable lives. And this reminds me of the tragic end of former minister Saifur Rahman in a road crash in an almost similar fashion. His car driver had tried his best to stop the car

when a cow suddenly sprang before it. He swerved to one side at a high speed (which is normal in a highway) but failed to stop and eventually fell into a ditch.

Here is a personal account. The driver of the microbus that I had used to travel to some district towns a couple of months back often came close to running over men, women and children when they suddenly started to cross the highway. My constant monitoring of the two sides of the road ahead somehow paid off and we reached our destination safely every time. In one word, it was total madness noticed on the highways and roads that connect district towns of the country.

Careless humans, equally careless cows and goats; frolicking school-going children, nonchalant cycle and motor-cycle riders, dare-devil cycle-rickshaw pullers, adamant power-tiller-turned-passenger

hauler drivers (Nosimon, Korimon) and rogue truck drivers engage in a mad rush to go ahead of one another in the narrow highway. There is no authority to be seen anywhere out there to enforce law to ensure safety of commuters on those roads. As a result, whenever a car hits a rickshaw or a jaywalker a huge mob gathers around and starts to beat up the poor driver.

Let us have a look at the overall world and country situation as far as road accidents are concerned. A feature report published in The Star, Friday weekly magazine of The Daily Star, says: "Bangladesh has more than 100 deaths per 10,000 registered vehicles (WB/UNESCAP). Although the official figure for road deaths is three to four thousand a year, independent studies by international agencies such as the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) have suggested the actual death toll in Bangladesh could be three times as high. The number of people seriously injured in road crashes is estimated at more than 1,00,000 each year. In Dhaka city, pedestrians alone comprise almost 75 percent of road accident fatalities."

The same feature report says: "Even if we leave aside for a moment the casualty statistics, the economic burden in itself is staggering. Road traffic injuries place a strain on the country's economy through the direct impacts on health care and rehabilitation services as well as through the indirect costs. It is estimated that road crashes cost us roughly 2% of GDP every year. This is almost equal to the total foreign aid received by Bangladesh in a given fiscal year!"

We further learn from the report that, globally, 1.3 million people are killed in road accidents annually, 3,500 lives lost per day. As many as 50 million are injured and suffer disability every year and that road traffic injuries are the leading cause of death globally for those between 10 and 24 years of age.

The alarming rise in the number of deaths and injuries and veritable non-action of the governments of the individual countries, had prompted the UN to take a serious note of the situation and in response had dedicated one World Health Day (possibly 2004) to the people killed and maimed in road accidents. The slogan that

year was: Road Safety Is No Accident. Very poignant indeed, emphasising the fact that you cannot take road safety casually, meaning, it does not happen clandestinely, rather you have to plan well and approach it with seriousness.

The UN Road Safety Collaboration experts works together with local experts, NGOs, research organisations, civil society members etc., as well as representatives from the transport and health sectors to address the major risk factors like road conditions, lightings of the roads, drunkenness when driving, use of seat-belt, eye condition of drivers, overtaking, over-speeding etc.

Here is a grim warning from WHO. It says that by 2020 road accident related injuries will be the third highest threat to public health, which will eventually outrank threats from diseases such as tuberculosis, diarrhoeal diseases and HIV/AIDS. WHO also said that in South Asia alone, road traffic fatalities are likely to increase from 135,000 in 2000 to 330,000 in 2020 (World Report on Road Traffic Injury Prevention, WHO, 2004). That is 144% increase in deaths from road crashes.

The global experts are of the opinion that road accidents are both predictable and preventable. What is needed to combat this life-threatening malaise is improving road conditions (less sharp bends in highways and more lights), patrolling of highways in high-speed cars, creating greater public awareness (through school curriculum and mass media campaigns) and strict implementation of traffic laws (both in cities and highways) to instill discipline in both drivers and passersby.

In the Dhaka metropolitan area, unless and until pedestrians are totally prohibited from crossing the roads stopping speeding cars, accidents will continue to occur with no faults of the drivers. Traffic police department must issue strict orders addressing the jaywalkers on Dhaka roads with messages of legal action against violators of laws. They must be forced to use foot-bridges built for them. They must be told in clear terms that if they are ever hit by a car the police will arrest them and not the driver of the car.

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If not they, then who?

To be respectful to the law in a democratic country, everyone, from a top-level executive to bottom-level worker, is bound to show his/her earnings and savings. It is meaningless to expect general people to be fair when the people at the top are not.

RIPAN KUMAR BISWAS

TIMOTHY F. Geithner, who is now secretary of treasury under the Obama administration, had to pay more than \$43,200 in back taxes and interest for underpayments from 2001 to 2004 to get clearance from the Senate Finance Committee to occupy the then President-elect Barack Obama's choice for treasury secretary.

To meet the transparency of the US administration, Clinton's foundation had to disclose the name of 205,000 donors worldwide before the Senate Foreign Committee confirmed Hillary R. Clinton as secretary of state. But Bangladeshis never receive such information or examples of inspiration from their country's legislatures, executives, leaders, or politicians.

Thanks to an English daily newspaper for bringing up a report that says 42 out of 345 lawmakers in the parliament, both from the treasury and opposition bench, including three state ministers, have never paid any income tax, claiming they do not have taxable income while, according to National Board of Revenue (NBR), each of these lawmakers spent Tk.15 to Tk.20 lakh in the parliamentary election, and the limit of tax-free income in the country is 165,000 per year.

In addition, according to both the Election Commission and NBR, most of these parliamentarians have Tax Identification Numbers (TINs) but very few of them show up in the tax book while some parliamentarians never feel an obligation to have TINs, keeping their huge income secret.

Since its independence in 1971, Bangladesh has seen no examples of motivation from leaders of its different governments and non-governmental organizations. As democracy is defined as a government system where people control how the government operates, what laws it passes, and how things get done, they have every right to know how their elected legislature runs the country. To be respectful to the law in a democratic country, everyone, from a top-level executive to bottom-level worker, is bound to show his/her earnings and savings. It is meaningless to expect general people to be fair when the people at the top are not.

According to John Quincy Adams (1767 -

1848), the 6th President of the United States, "If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader." Being a good leader means that he/she inspires others to follow his/her example. They are leading people to success and being responsible for their actions. In addition, a good leader inspires confidence and represents a strong example of what needs to be aimed for.

As we assume legislatures or top people are good leaders, they should have good characters, beliefs and values by which they can easily motivate others, but negative characteristics of a leader, or noted person, only convey the wrong message to the people.

Calling it as a charter for change, the present ruling government promised that powerful people must submit wealth statements annually. The same holds true for general citizens bound to do so in its five priority issues in the last election manifesto. Though it is politically motivated according to Awami League (AL), its party chief, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was detained on corruption charges and asked to submit her wealth statement voluntarily during the last caretaker government.

Her arch-rival, Begum Khaleda Zia, former premier of Bangladesh and the chairperson of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, forgot to mention her wealth accrued in 1980, 1981, 1982, 1986, 1987 and 1991, while she enjoyed the support of a huge office set-up during her tenure.

Taking bribes, hiding wealth reports, saving in or buying a house in a foreign country, are very common activities among Bangladeshi leaders, only because they have no legal obligation to give their financial status.

The White House published on April 15, 2009 the taxable income of the President and Mrs. Michelle Obama for the 2008 tax year as \$855,323 in federal taxes and \$78,000 in state taxes. The Obamas had \$2.35 million in taxable income after taking deductions, which included his salary as a public servant to the US government and royalties from his two published books, Dreams from My Father and The Audacity of Hope. A further look at President Barack Obama's 2008 tax returns shows that \$172,050 was donated



Paying tax is national obligation.

to charities like CARE and United Negro College Fund.

The Bangladesh government has extended time for submitting income tax returns from September 30 to October 30 aiming to collect more tax. Presently, the country has 2.2 million TIN holders but only 0.67 of them pay income tax, says NBR. About 80% of companies do not pay income tax. The World Bank says Bangladesh's tax-GDP (gross domestic product) ratio is among the lowest in South Asia, even lower than that of Nepal.

The income-tax-collection target has been fixed at \$2.40 billion (BDT 165.60 billion) for the current fiscal year, 27% higher than last year's target. In fiscal 2008-09, around 0.67 million taxpayers' submitted tax returns involving \$144.78 million (BDT 7.92 billion) out of 2.2 million TIN holders.

In a fresh move to make its services friendlier to taxpayers, the NBR and the British donor -- Department for International Development (DFID) -- will pick an international consultancy early next year to find a string of innovative solutions that can change the way the NBR functions now. Still, it always remains an uphill task for NBR to function independently and properly, as it regularly faces government interventions. Very often, it is used as political weapon.

It will be difficult to say how impartially

the NBR worked during the last caretaker government, but no doubt, it was the vital weapon to send politicians, bureaucrats, legislatures, or business people behind bars. While the present high-profiled tax defaulters, including ministers, are out of legal proceedings, former AL secretary, Abdul Jalil was issued an arrest warrant in a case filed by NBR for dodging his income tax of \$5,910. Clearly, the filing of the case and issuance of the arrest warrant against Jalil is an outcome of his recent derogatory statements about the party and ninth parliamentary elections.

No doubt, paying tax is a national obligation and a step to make the country financially secure. Policymakers, however, particularly those among the politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen, have responded very little thus far to bring about positive changes in this issue, as many of them are widely perceived to be involved in the process.

Setting a good example is not a "put-on." It's simply something that can positively motivate others. In exercise of its positive motivation, the present government should exercise transparency regarding tax paying and make it a legal obligation for everyone to give his/her wealth status to the government.

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