

The fire at NCTB warehouse

Emergency steps necessary to keep to textbook schedule

THE devastating fire which broke out at the warehouse of the National Curriculum and Textbook Board on Sunday raises a number of questions about how it happened and what lessons can be learned from it. That a fire could occur at such an important place, one which has a direct link with education, is certainly beyond the imagination. Naturally, therefore, the first question which springs to mind relates to the presence or otherwise of adequate fire fighting equipment in the warehouse. Given the fact that till yesterday the fire could not be put out fully, one can reasonably guess that the NCTB warehouse did not have any equipment it could employ to limit the damage caused by the conflagration. And so from our question we move on to another: how is it that in all these years no one gave a thought to the necessary fire fighting equipment that might be needed at some point? When a building houses important documents and papers (and the NCTB is surely that), it should have been for the authorities to have such precautions in place.

The devastation, as we understand from news reports, is complete. Of the 1,700 tons of paper stored in the warehouse for purposes of textbook production, most have been gutted or badly damaged by the fire. That can only mean that the 190,000,000 books that are printed and distributed every year by the NCTB authorities now have a huge question mark before them. When in normal circumstances, the printing and distribution of textbooks is delayed every academic year by anywhere from two to three months, it is hard to see how the NCTB authorities will tide over this new crisis and go on to make books available to students on time next year. To be sure, Education Minister Nurul Islam Nahid has reassured the country that the normal distribution of the textbooks will not be hampered despite the fire. Even so, one does not quite see how the crisis can be tided over. Emergency measures certainly need to be put in place for the authorities to meet the deadline, but precisely what the nature of those measures will be remains a question. It is extremely important that the minister's reassurance be backed up by round the clock work to tide over the problem and convince educational institutions that they need have no apprehension about the situation.

That said, a full and meaningful inquiry into the cause of the fire is in order. There are some glaring gaps, those which may have ignited the fire, that must be brought within the purview of the inquiry. The absence of fire fighting equipment is of course one of them. As for the fire spreading to all corners of the warehouse, one reason appears to be the thickness in which the stacks of paper were kept in the warehouse. Clearly no gap or space was there between one stack and another, which made it easy for the fire to leap from one spot to another. In other words, skilled arrangement of materials has been made conspicuous by its absence. No in-built system, be it about fire fighting or arranging materials, was there.

Finally, it becomes necessary now to see if any sabotage was involved. And that naturally raises the question of how much security was there to make the NCTB warehouse safe from dangers of all kinds.

Scramble over tender submission

The unhealthy spree must be held in check

NAGAR Bhaban day before yesterday was the scene of heightened tension centring around tendering for a lease of a parking space and three pieces of construction work. These are meant for a ward under Dhaka City Corporation.

The whole business involves Tk 10 crore, but it appears that it came across as too much of a temptation to let go off. Some activists of Awami League and its youth wing Jubo League could not stop short of making a virtual public demonstration of having a stake in it. They scuffled leaving five injured and landing in a hospital. They were totally oblivious of the adverse impression that the incident of chase and counter-chase and the brawl created on the public mind.

Although the submission of tender as such was not affected by the incident taking place out of the office premises and after tender dropping, nonetheless such a disturbance can have its fall-out in the shape of discouraging genuine businessmen and contractors from coming forward.

Such fractious fight over tender business for lease or construction work of variegated nature has become somewhat tendentious, albeit bringing the ruling party image to avoidable disrepute. It seems Prime Minister's repeated exhortations to refrain from such acts are falling on deaf ears. Some determined dissuasion through the party channels and specific instructions to different local bodies and government and semi-government institutions requiring of them to follow rules will be necessary. The law enforcement angle can also be put to use. All in all, there is need for the ruling party to take guard against elements who do not care to protect government's credibility and image.

Of course, everybody has a right to legitimate business but that does not mean that an unfair practice will be allowed to be adopted that could hurt business and normal flow of economic activities.

The BNP -- and the politics of petulance

Sheikh Hasina's government is surely in an embattled state, but that is no reason to suppose that the BNP should now believe it can take charge again. It has not acknowledged its mistakes; it has never gone for soul-searching and it yet looks upon all those men and women who have given it a bad name as heroic figures in its councils. That is not politics. It is anti-politics at its worst.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

YOU watch the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and you wonder where all the good people in it have gone. It is, of course, another matter that you may not consider the party a true representative of popular aspirations as they shaped up in the 1960s and during the entirety of the War of Liberation. Its coming into being was, as we have learned so sadly and so bitterly by now, fundamentally geared to putting our secularism under the rug or even cause it to crash headlong into the rocks below our perch of Bengali nationalistic fervour. But that is a subject for another day. We will talk about it later, as we have talked about it in the past.

And so let us go back to this question of good men being in the BNP. You can be pretty sure that in all the chaos the party has wallowed in, whether in power or out of it, there have been some individuals who have sometimes given us reason to think that someday the BNP would forge itself into a voice of moderation and constructive politics.

It was this hope, feeble though it was, that led us into believing last week that Begum Khaleida Zia would actually be seen sharing an anti-poverty platform with Sheikh Hasina. There were, after all, some sure signs of that happy event really coming to pass. Her party chief whip Jinal Abidin Faroque was there, beside Speaker Abdul Hamid and ruling Awami League chief whip Abdus Shahid. For the first time in

years, it was a whole country, which prepared to see the two women stepping on to the same platform and giving it a sense of what they planned to do about tackling poverty.

And then the Begum backed out, for reasons that were not simply there. She spoke long and intensely before the media, focusing on the areas where the government was stumbling and where it was committing blunders. No arguing with that, for every opposition in every country has the right to perceive conditions as it sees fit. If the former prime minister was flailing away at the Awami League, no one was complaining. But it is what she did next that left us all feeling disappointed and feeling low. She would not, so she said, be there at the anti-poverty rally after all. And there it was, this deliberate torpedoing of a good cause by an individual who by now should have turned into a respected elder stateswoman for Bengalis through her long stint in power. That she has not, that she has regularly made it known to the nation that she and her party are demoralised and depressed once they are out of power, is a truth whose veracity has been noted by people yet once more.

That leads to the bigger question: what is it that ails the BNP, keeps it from taking its rightful place in the Jatiyo Sangsad? In politics, you do not expect petulance or indulgence. You might have a long face, you might quibble, when in your youth you lose a game of carom or badminton, but once you have settled on politics as a career, you



Hoping for better times.

are expected to take things in your stride. But that is a state of maturity, which has not yet touched the BNP.

In power, it becomes a symbol of ruthlessness. Out of power, it does not know what it wants. And because it does not, it does all sorts of strange things. Think of the former speaker, deputy speaker and chief whip, all BNP men. Despite the charges of bad politics levelled at them by parliament, they have carried on as though nothing has happened. Good politicians are they who, having been accused of wrongdoing, are ready to clear their names in the interest of their future. Not here, though; not in the BNP. Khondokar Delwar Hossain gives you a daily breakdown of BNP thoughts, or the lack of them, as they develop or do not develop. He is not worried at all about his reputation as it came to be in the past.

Now, about this insistent boycott of the Jatiyo Sangsad by the BNP, there are two ways of looking at it.

Firstly, you tell yourself that the party has

psychologically been unable to reconcile itself to its defeat at last year's election. That is something bizarre, given that the party ought to have known that after all the corruption and the bad administration it had put the nation through, there was no way it could ride back to office.

Secondly, this boycott of Parliament makes you wonder if the party is waiting for a miracle to take place, or call it disaster, and throw the Awami League out of office.

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Big step forward for Copenhagen conference

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HARUN UR RASHID

THE summit on climate change at the UN in New York on September 22 has given a strong boost to negotiations over an important international treaty on global warming in Copenhagen in December. This treaty will replace the Kyoto Protocol of 1997 that expires in 2012.

China, India and Japan, along with the private sector, made positive contributions at the summit to combat climate change. Chinese President Hu Jintao emerged from the UN meeting looking like the climate change "good guy." He promised that China would take on an ambitious economy-wide emission-reduction target, increase its renewable energy use by 15% by 2020, and plant trees in an area the size of Norway.

He pledged to curb carbon emissions per unit of GDP between 2010 and 2020 by a "notable margin" -- this might be unveiled at the Copenhagen conference. He also said that China would reduce its projected annual emissions by 900 million tonnes of carbon dioxide by 2010 -- a reduction equivalent to Russia's annual emissions and well over Australia's annual carbon dioxide output of 550 million tonnes. The International Energy Agency says that, on

its current policies, China would have saved more carbon emissions by 2020 than any other country.

Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama said that Japan would move towards an emissions trading scheme and has a target to cut carbon emissions by 25%. This is considered a significant statement from a country that is the second-largest economy in the world.

India also pledged that it would adopt domestic legislation to reduce carbon emission. The Indian environment minister said that legislation was being drafted in Delhi to limit India's carbon footprint and, in the process, repair his country's reputation for intransigence on climate change before the crucial December UN conference in Copenhagen. India took its first step toward more cooperation on carbon emissions two months ago at the Major Economies Forum in Italy when it signed a declaration to cap the average global temperature at two degrees above pre-industrialisation levels.

The announcement marks a breakthrough in international talks, which have stalled over whether emissions curbs in a new UN climate treaty should apply to developing nations as well as to the developed countries covered by the Kyoto

Protocol.

The move reflects Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's desire to project a more positive international image for India as it emerges as an important player on the world stage through G-20. His aides say he wants India to engage with the world in a way that befits its aspiration to be a permanent member of the UN Security Council and have greater say in the running of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

President Obama has already committed to a cut of 80% in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, compared with 1999. The American Clean Energy and Security Act passed by the House of Representatives sets an interim target for 2020 but it is not clear when the Senate will pass it.

It is these interim targets that should be addressed now by all countries during the coming weeks, if the goal is reducing emissions to 20 gigatonnes by 2050. That means global emissions have to peak within the next 5 years and be steadily falling by 2020.

While commitments by the largest emitters, already on the table for 2020, offer significant cuts, experts say that they fall four or five gigatonnes short of what is necessary. However, the commitments are good signs for the Copenhagen conference.

It is encouraging that 181 investors, collectively responsible for the management of \$13 trillion in assets, launched a statement in New York in September to support a global agreement on climate change. The Leadership Forum for business leaders, which ran alongside the UN Summit, highlighted a variety of ideas from

the private sector for low-carbon emission.

Policies must benefit the most vulnerable communities (such as Bangladesh and Maldives) and not compromise their economic development. Financial mechanisms must be put in place to provide positive incentives for developing countries to reduce their emissions through mitigation and adaptation.

Unless poverty is reduced in Bangladesh, it will be difficult to halt environmental degradation in a major way. Bangladeshis will have to confront the dilemma of how to reduce poverty without degradation of the environment in these days of soaring food prices, global financial crisis and climate change.

Two factors are important for environmental challenges in the country -- education and publicity. The government may help create public motivation through mass media -- TV, radio, mass rallies, advertisement, meetings and festivals on environmental issues. Environmental issues may be incorporated into the curriculum of school and college students.

Political leaders must devise and implement the right policies to guide national and global emissions trajectories and there must be real vision, leadership and creativity, as well as mutual understanding of the difficulties of making and implementing domestic policies. The leaders can muster the effort and forge a path towards a more prosperous and sustainable future for generations to come.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Speed bumps on the Asean highway

But Abhisit faces two critical challenges at the summit: domestic security and the border conflict with Cambodia, which is a fellow Asean member as well as a next-door neighbour. Abhisit appears to have made summit security a priority, warning that the draconian Internal Security Law would be enforced in Cha-am/Hua Hin and Bangkok through most of October.

SUPALAK GANJANAKHUNDEE

THAILAND'S Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva has garnered praise from other national leaders at previous Asean meetings, but the full-scale summit he's hosting next week in Cha-am/Hua Hin will test him.

Abhisit's cool and steady hand on the reins at the 14th summit in the same locale early this year impressed Malaysia's then-premier, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who raved to reporters afterwards.

The abjectly inclined Abhisit has little problem conducting meetings of any kind thanks to his knack for staying on top of issues and responding appropriately. Foreign ministry officials were ready with back-up details for the prime minister at

the earlier Asean gathering and found he didn't need them. No one needed to whisper in his ear.

The 15th summit next weekend -- October 23 to 25 -- is a full-scale meeting with Asean's 10 member states and Pacific Rim partners attending, meaning there will be 16 state leaders in all.

Though just nine months in office, Abhisit has met most of them several times.

And he's also on steady ground with the central issue on the agenda: formally inaugurating the Asean Inter-governmental Commission on Human Rights.

He's quite familiar with the other topics, too -- food and energy security, establishing rules to settle internal disputes, and dealing with natural disasters, climate change and the economic crisis.

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Abhisit appears to have made summit security a priority, warning that the draconian Internal Security Law would be enforced in Cha-am/Hua Hin and Bangkok through most of October.

The move is not groundless, with anti-government red-shirt protesters having shut down the April Asean meeting in Pattaya. Thailand, which yields the Asean chairmanship at the end of this year, cannot afford another such disruption.

The red shirts of the Democratic Alliance Against Dictatorship have threatened to derail next week's summit if the government blocks their concurrent rally in Bangkok.

And facing Abhisit across the table at the coming summit will be Cambodian Premier Hun Sen, who will raise the longstanding and newly revived dispute over Preah Vihear.

The issue became heated again last year when Thailand objected to Cambodia's bid to have the centuries-old temple listed as a World Heritage site.

Although a UN agency ruled in 1962 that

Preah Vihear is Cambodian property, the Abhisit government is insisting that the adjacent 4.6 square kilometres were never properly demarcated and in fact belong to Thailand.

A joint boundary commission has undertaken the slow process of demarcation, but Hun Sen wants to talk about the temple at the Asean summit, his foreign minister Hor Namhong has indicated.

In its several attempts since last year to have an international forum decide the temple's fate, including last year's Asean ministerial meeting in Singapore, Cambodia has tended to be bombastic in its claim to ownership.

Thailand's representatives have been repeatedly forced to explain their position.

How will Abhisit handle the situation if Hun Sen mentions Preah Vihear in every session next weekend? As the summit's chairman, he will be hard-pressed to respond fairly, if not prevented from doing so by Asean's rules of conduct.

Unless Abhisit manages to sideline the Preah Vihear conflict ahead of the summit, Hun Sen could well be the one this time to cast a gloomy shadow over the gathering.

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