

## Launch tragedy in Bhola

*This playing with human lives must stop*

**T**HE death toll in the launch mishap in the river Tentulia on Friday night has already crossed 60 and many more passengers are still missing. It was the kind of disaster that we have been watching on a regular basis whenever there is a heavy rush of passengers during any major festival.

The Bhola-bound MV Coco-4 keeled over very close to the river terminal when its bottom cracked, or it lost balance due to the passengers assembling on one side of its roof in large numbers, just when the vessel was about to anchor at the terminal. Whatever might be the reason, there is no denying that the safety of passengers was badly compromised. The launch operators had little sense of the impending danger, and it is evident that the launch was overloaded way above its capacity. And most of the victims are reported to be children and women who had absolutely no chance of swimming ashore.

The rescue operations that follow such disasters are usually very slow and the rescuers do not often succeed in lifting anything more than the sunken vessel with all the lives lost. But in the case of Bhola tragedy, the official rescue operation came too late for any good, although the launch had turned upside down very close to the terminal. Local people lent a hand but it was too little, too late. In fact, the rescue ship Hamza, reached the spot the following day, so it was just lifting the craft and recovery of corpses. It seems nothing is in place to respond quickly to a launch capsize and everybody is caught napping.

During festivals, the authorities are focused on increasing the number of river crafts or the frequency of trips without sparing a thought on correspondingly ensuring safety precautions in river journeys or planning for contingency like a rescue operation.

The shipping minister has said what all his predecessors used to say after such mishaps. Formation of a five-member inquiry committee that is supposed to submit its report in seven days sounds too perfunctory. Expression of sympathy for the victims is also not enough to console those who have lost their near and dear ones. There should be arrangements for compensation to the victims' families.

The issue has to be included in the government's list of areas where firm action is needed to set things right. Dozens of committees were formed in the past following such tragedies and scores of suggestions and recommendation were tossed in, but what is the result? Launch capsize continues to be a matter of great worry.

It is really not acceptable that worn out, overloaded launches with faulty designs still operate in different routes. It is absolutely imperative for the government to ensure that launch owners and operators do not put commercial considerations ahead of human safety.

## Commonwealth lifts the spirit for Copenhagen

*Legally binding treaty on climate change awaited*

**T**HE Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) 2009 in Port of Spain, the capital of Trinidad and Tobago has voiced a strong commitment to efforts for reaching a political consensus in Copenhagen to produce a legally binding deal by 2010 for cutting greenhouse gas emissions and financing adaptation measures by the developing countries.

This is a very significant initiative on the part of the Commonwealth for some cogent reasons. First and foremost, Commonwealth is made up of 54 countries of differing economic and technological standings representing one-third of the world's population. The countries of the Commonwealth are from the developed and developing worlds, the North and the South and the East and the West. In one word, CHOGM is typically representative of the 192 countries having stake in the UN Conference of Parties (COP-15) due in Copenhagen early this month. When so many countries could forge a combined position on climate change in Port of Spain, the natural expectation is that the negotiating countries in Copenhagen would take the message, bridge whatever gaps remain in their positions and cut an equitable and just climate deal to save the planet.

We regard the Commonwealth's initiative in the immediate prelude to Copenhagen as the most propitious development when its critics have been expressing a degree of doubt in the organisation's efficacy. Indeed the Commonwealth has in it a considerable base for the countries to complement each other in their efforts to limit climate change impacts.

Of course, the Commonwealth needs to be reformed to live up to its potential in the changing dynamic of the present-day world. By taking the move in Port of Spain, CHOGM has sent a signal across for a hands-on involvement in make-or-break endeavours. Certain core values have been the strength of the Commonwealth, something which seems to have been reflected to an extent through the strong commitment expressed for fair a climate change related deal in the Danish capital.

## Is Bangladeshi visa too easy to obtain?

The recent arrest of some dangerous foreign terrorist operatives in the country only proves the point that ours is a favourite destination for the international criminals. Did we ever wonder aloud how did they enter our country in the first place? Who gave them the visa? Who checked their papers at the immigration at the airport? It seems those Bangladeshi officials out there are so "kind" to the thugs and crooks that they cannot say no to them even if they look dangerous enough to scare the daylight out of you.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

**O**NLY those who have gone through the grill know it well that it is not easy to obtain the needed visa to go to India or Pakistan or America or Britain or Thailand or Singapore. One has to endure onslaught of rain, dust, scorching sun, traffic congestion, and disappointment and often humiliation to get a visa from the missions of these countries. When it comes to Bangladesh it is said that visa officials of those countries are extra cautious and careful before putting their OK seal on the application form.

But I am curious to know what does it take for a foreign national to obtain a visa from Bangladesh missions abroad, like in Pakistan, India and the Middle-East? Do they have to face the same grilling we face in the foreign missions in Dhaka -- standing in a serpentine line since five in the morning? Have we ever thought about it or brought it up for discussion or done some investigation to find out the visa criteria followed in our missions? From the look of things, it seems it is too easy to get a visa to go to Bangladesh. Please correct me if I am wrong.

Why am I talking about our visa system? Well, possibly only a cynic would agree with

me that there are ominous indications, signs and forewarnings that Bangladesh is fast becoming a hotbed of rendezvous for international crime syndicates. Just look around and you will find medicine smugglers, gold smugglers, heroine peddlers, small arms peddlers and terrorism peddlers from all around the region are coming and going at will, thanks to the very, very liberal visa officials at our foreign missions. What do they do here and how do they meet their expenses should be a headache of the intelligence agencies of the country.

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Those hardened criminals from Pakistan, India, Middle-East and God knows where else obtain a visit visa or business visa or student visa from our



Easy entry point?

missions and enter Bangladesh to materialise their evil intents. There is no shortage of anti-people and anti-Bangladesh elements in this country to provide them shelter and support. Once they are here they manage to obtain a Bangladeshi passport and start to live like one of us, and even manage to "obtain" a wife!

Though once in a while some smugglers get caught at some entry points, or inside the city, that is not enough. The first check points should be our missions abroad. They must not be allowed to come to Bangladesh, and for that matter getting a visa for Bangladesh must be made very, very tough. Our visa officials and staff members in the visa department must have a list of criminals and criminally inclined people who might apply for visa. They must learn to turn down suspicious applications. They must do it for the love of the country.

Finally it comes down on our foreign office and the Ministry of Foreign affairs to act fast. It is their solemn responsibility to take cognisance of the fact that hardened criminals are entering our country and doing anti-state activities. Therefore, they

should sit down in full earnest and prepare a whole new set of visa criteria for foreign nationals. An applicant must fulfil those terms and conditions to obtain a visa. Our visa officials and staff members must show their utmost allegiance to the well-being of the country.

It always pays to be careful and pre-emptive. Many of our citizens are under threats from national and international criminals. This has to be taken seriously. Our markets are being flooded with smuggled gold, sarees, cosmetics, electronic goods, CDs, and apparently terrorists of every size, colour and nationality. This is not a good sign for our economy. For the security and safety of the citizens and the state itself our intelligence agencies must outwit these criminals. They must act before the criminals strike. It is a dangerous game. And we must be vigilant round the clock. So stop them in their tracks in their own homeland. Don't give them visas.

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## The BNP's defining moments?

Notwithstanding the council's fate, political observers are seeing the upcoming events as the BNP's defining moment, when some of the party's fundamental contradictions as well as those in the existing leadership are likely to be addressed. Since the party's last council meeting and deliberations the polity has metamorphosed a great deal, raising the public expectation and making it even more critical of governance.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

**I**N the wake of one-eleven, the once powerful Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) almost disintegrated. Even before that, in its worst ever aberration, the party existentially dipped to its nadir. Even now the party is chronically divided into reformists and non-reformists. The contending factions have engaged each other in an invisible cold war. The divisions and relationship seem to have become a permanent feature of the party. Even the party supremo, Madam Zia, has not been able to reconcile the differences between the quarrelling factions.

Yet, amid disgust and delusion on the one hand and optimism and buoyancy on

the other, the BNP is going to hold its council at long last. Although December 8 has been scheduled for the purpose no one knows its fate because the party's local units were not been able to complete the council at their level by November 25. So, speculation abounds not only about the date of the council, but also about its nitty-gritty.

Notwithstanding the council's fate, political observers are seeing the upcoming events as the BNP's defining moment, when some of the party's fundamental contradictions as well as those in the existing leadership are likely to be addressed. Since the party's last council meeting and deliberations the polity has metamorphosed a great deal, raising the public

expectation and making it even more critical of governance. A broad brush in politics in a perfunctory manner is neither practicable nor acceptable for a nation of 150 million people with their growing demands and equally growing difficulty in meeting them. The new generation of BNP activists is no more in favour of the old archaic leadership. Perhaps the people responsible for the party's ignominy will have to be jettisoned by the party.

Dashing those lofty ideas and pious hopes only a few days back, Madam Zia minced no words while giving her bit of mind about the shape of things the BNP would assume to portend a transition to future BNP leadership. It would indicate that she has either changed, or is prepared to change, her political outlook. On the occasion of the 45<sup>th</sup> birthday anniversary of Tareq Zia, her elder son, she did not speak with her tongue in cheek as to the changes due in the party in the party hierarchy. She made it almost certain that Tareq Zia could put on her mantle -- perhaps no more on ad hoc basis -- whenever that change ever occurs.

In politics, calling it a day at a point of time after presiding over as many as three governments and reaching a suitable age to

look back and reminisce makes good sense -- particularly when the person concerned refuses to develop a positive political outlook while enjoying all the trappings as well as perks and privileges of a responsible office. Aren't Madam Zia, a chronic truant, and her like a liability for the office they hold? All told, few, however, think that Madam Zia will quit -- given her personal penchant for asserting authority -- now with Tarq Zia by her side.

Those who think of genuinely pulling BNP out of the quagmire that it has inadvertently been stuck in are indeed worried over the Tareq Zia factor and its suitable disposal because the mother's considered mascot is not still a salable brand without removal of the miasma over him. He is still besmeared by the Hawa Bhaban sleaze, and more is being added to it with his reported connection with the August 21 brutality. For none of his crimes has he yet undergone a period of penance to wash them off. How can he be acceptable, at least to the sensible people in the BNP. Won't it then be a matter of Tweedledum and Tweedledee?

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

## Why Mumbai won't wait till 2025

Going by the dubious precedence set by Justice M.S. Liberhan, a half-truth about the catastrophic events of Mumbai 26/11 should become available to Parliament and the Indian public by 2025. Bad luck if you want the full truth, or if you want it within your lifetime; you can never hurry a judge determined to be slow.

M.J. AKBAR

**G**OING by the dubious precedence set by Justice M.S. Liberhan, a half-truth about the catastrophic events of Mumbai 26/11 should become available to Parliament and the Indian public by 2025. Bad luck if you want the full truth, or if you want it within your lifetime; you can never hurry a judge determined to be slow.

A fate worse than death awaits the judge whose conscience cannot be purchased at the going rate of a government bungalow in Delhi. In Mumbai, Justice Srikrishna delivered his findings on the violent consequences of the Babri demolition, a far more difficult and sensitive assignment, well in time. His report has not been allowed formally into the public domain, since it tells the truth, and truth is injurious to the health of a government that was complicit in the mismanagement of the riots.

The duty of an enquiry is not to restate the obvious, but to repair any faults in the system through a thorough diagnosis of the malady, to lay out the findings fearlessly, and hold the powerful accountable where

there has been a violation of trust or a betrayal of the responsibilities of office. A judicial enquiry is much more than a police investigation into guilt. It invokes the highest sense of justice, which is far more than legality. We have become indifferent to the corruption at the lower levels of the criminal-justice system. Are we now being trained to accept partiality and collusion in a judicial enquiry? If nothing is sacrosanct, we will be subject to the dictatorship of the profane.

We did not need 17 years of casuistry to reveal something that was visibly evident within 17 minutes of the first assault on the dome and structure of the Babri mosque on December 6, 1992 -- that the BJP, RSS and Shiv Sena were involved. They had led the emotional movement that climaxed on December 6. BJP leaders like Vinay Katiyar, the alleged mastermind, wear it as a badge of pride.

Justice Liberhan has done us no favours by "concluding" what was reported in every newspaper the next day. But he has done the nation and the people a huge disservice by twisting and contorting elements of the truth in order to hide the

conscious collusion of Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, his home minister S.B. Chavan and eventually, through a conspiracy of silence, the whole cabinet.

It requires a tremendous backward leap of logic to find Rao innocent and hold those who were working to protect the Babri mosque, like leaders of the Babri Masjid Protection Committee, guilty. It is true that a few Muslim leaders were shrill in some speeches, but so what? Emotions were high, and their tenor was nothing compared to the rhetoric of others. Incredible as it might seem, this is one of the findings of the Liberhan report.

With the credibility of enquiry commissions in tatters, it is hardly surprising that the protagonists and victims of the barbarous terrorist invasion of Mumbai a year ago are not waiting for any government-sponsored investigation to run its course. I presume they do not, for starters, want to wait for 17 years. Officers at the very top of the hierarchy, like former police commissioner Hassan Gafoor, have begun to tell their versions to a hungry media. This is not the whole of it. Leaking by police officers on an off-the-record basis has reached monsoon proportions in Mumbai. This constitutes, in theory, an astonishing collapse of discipline; in practice, the government is utterly incapable of taking any action because anything it does will also expose its own sins of omission and commission.

Widows of martyred police officers have no faith in the government's ability or desire to establish a credible narrative of

what actually transpired, and why. They are publishing their impression of events, backed up by their individual research, like Vinita Kamte, wife of Assistant Commissioner of Police Ashok Kamte, who died doing his duty while others chose survival over challenge. They are filling a black hole into which the government has sought to consign that terrible memory. In the process, allegations have been made against serving police officers that cannot be ignored; they must be investigated, and the officers either exonerated or punished.

The reluctance of the politician to pursue the past can be easily understood. Much drama surrounded the resignation of the then Maharashtra Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh. Where is he now? Why, in the Union Cabinet, of course, a loyal colleague of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, responsible for managing the whole nation rather than just one state. The resignation drama of 2009 was highly effective, since it staved off any punishment at the polls in 2010. Politicians are certain of one thing if they are certain of anything at all: the voter has a short memory.

Ruling party politicians might find it useful to recall, however, a well-known rule of democracy. When opposition parties fail to play their role, the people become the opposition. This takes a long time, and people give their government a very long rope. But every rope is finite. And a rope can so easily become a noose.

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