

Deaths in river again!

High time we implement rules

RIVER travel used to be the safest mode of travel in Bangladesh. Not any longer. It seems that the number of disasters on the waterways is keeping pace with road accidents in the country. Over a period of one week two horrible launch disasters have cost the lives of nearly two hundred people.

And, of course, as usual there will be a committee to enquire into the causes of the accident, and a report will be duly submitted to the appropriate authority, and as surely as not, there will be, unfortunately, repetition of such disasters, because the recommendations and the suggested remedial measures will not get implemented for some reason or the other.

The public transport system has remained a neglected area particularly the passenger safety aspect, and reportedly there is collusion between the owners and the monitoring agencies that look the other way and allow transgressions and the flouting of rules for monetary profit.

The Kishoreganj motorboat / trawler accident is a case in point where reportedly the two vessels were, in the first place, manned by inexperienced operators. Apart from that, the propensity to overload the launches and motorboats and trawlers, with the authorities deliberately looking the other way, is most often the cause of accidents. We have several very recent reports where vessels using major river ports in the country under full supervision of IWTA personnel, carried passengers more than double their authorised capacity, apart from the fact that the river routes were full of river crafts of all definitions carrying passengers, most of them unauthorised.

Given that our waterways are the most frequented and naturally the more commonly used routes of travel, the sheer apathy and neglect of the monitoring agencies to ensure that rules and regulations are followed while plying river vessels, make nonsense of the government's bounden duty to ensure public safety.

It is regrettable that the launch operators continue to defy restrictions on load capacity. One is not aware of any launch operator or owner being punished for deaths due to negligence or willful disregard of the rules. We are not aware of any official being punished for failing in their duty to implement the rules. We are not aware of anyone taken to task for giving unfit vessels permission to ply.

Bad operators, vessels that are not river worthy and overloading are the main causes of river disasters. And these are not difficult to prevent. If only those who are responsible to ensure public safety performed their jobs with due diligence and did not fall for grafts, if only the owners put lives of people over extra-profit motive and the administration acted quickly to make sure that the errant persons were made examples of so many lives would be saved.

Carnage in Pakistan

Targeting mosques is most heinous

WE are appalled at the incident of bombing inside a mosque in Pakistan which killed over two dozen people, including four children. In this latest suicide bombing incident the bomber blew himself up after entering the mosque when devotees were about to go home after holding a religious congregation. It was a heinous act by all definition and deserves condemnation in the strongest of language. Targeting unarmed civilians, especially devotees belonging to another community in their places of worship, only proves that the perpetrators have no respect for human life and religion in general.

The state of sectarian clashes among various communities in Pakistan is going from bad to worse, with no sign of reason and logic coming to play to defuse tension. Past experience shows that mindless acts only infuriate the victims' families and friends to retaliate with greater intensity.

This also needs to be said that suicide as a means of achieving any religious or political objective has been strongly prohibited in the holy books of Islam but to our utmost dismay we have noticed that many clandestine groups in Pakistan have been sending young followers to their peril to achieve their agenda. The suicide bomber in the latest incident in Pakistan was only 17 which shows the vulnerability of the adolescent to terrorist messages. Like an automaton he ended his life and took that of many others with him. The situation in Pakistan has deteriorated in recent times with the Taliban and Al Qaeda elements extending support to various anti-establishment factions inside the country.

What is needed to be done at the moment by the Pakistan government is stepping up security in front of the mosques across the country to deter any such future attacks. Since the whereabouts of suicide bombers are not easy to determine, many tier security belt in sensitive spots might work to obtain the objective. Our sympathy goes to the grief-stricken families of the deceased and the injured in the bombing incident.

Culture of 'truancy' in the House

The voters can at least expect that their chosen representative in the legislature would dedicate some time out of their busy schedule to sit in the House and discuss the issues that have to do with their well-being and development.

SYED FATAHUL ALIM

LAWMAKERS are people's elected representatives and their primary job, as their designation implies, is to frame laws in parliament. Since the people of different parliamentary constituencies elect the members of parliament (MPs) through ballot, it's a small wonder that constituents expect service from them. However, there are different departments of the administration, the local government bodies and the service-providing agencies to look after the various needs of the people. The local MPs, on their part, play their roles by bringing to the government's notice where these official service agencies are failing or proving to be inadequate. A particular MP may raise the issue in the House so that the minister concerned may address it. In this way, the MP also pinpoints the areas under her/his constituency that merit special attention from the government from the perspective of development. The issues may also cover areas where the residents are faced with a problem that warrants urgent addressing. In fact, the constituents are wont to think that their MP will solve all their problems as s/he represents them either in the government or in the opposition.

The upshot of it all is that the MPs too often indulge themselves in the delusions of grandeur. They begin to think they are

there to solve every problem on earth, if those have anything to do with the constituency they represent. But if they have a finger in every pie, what are those other elected bodies such as the upazila parishads or the union parishads for? Are not also the government and the semi-government organisations there to look after the various needs of the people and of development? No doubt an MP is the overall guardian of her/his constituency, but then the other representative bodies do also have their jurisdictions and exclusive areas to serve their constituencies.

A voter would remain loyal to the representative in the legislature as long as that MP remains concerned about the welfare of the constituency and its people.

Now consider the case of those political leaders and public representatives, whether in parliament, in the upazila parishads or in the union parishads, who are more interested in their perks, pays and various other privileges than the welfare of the people. Sad to say, unlike what one would see in the not-too-distant past, some modern-day MPs have no qualm about using their newfound power to accumulate wealth. And sometimes, the government, too, is found happily pandering to the elected public representatives' passion for Mammon. Though the political culture of electing constitutional governments through holding general elections, was restored in 1991 through

dislodgement of the previous dictatorial government, one remnant of the hated past still lingered on. Surprisingly though, the political leadership that was instrumental in bringing about the change was not eager to remove this throwback to the authoritarian times from the political culture. The point at issue is the ordinance that enables the government to provide expensive cars, as well as other perks and privileges to the MPs. Oddly though, the 2007-2008's army-supported caretaker government repealed that ordinance. At that time, many hailed the military-backed government's decision.

Now, though the ordinance has not been made into a law in the ninth parliament, the provision has not been done away with altogether either.

How to explain this change of heart among the latter-day politicians and public representatives? The truth is the ideology of self-denial, sacrifice and high moral standard that inspired political workers and leaders alike in the past is no longer the driving force of their modern-day counterparts. The influence of consumerism has transformed them into political professionals. So, why should they deny themselves the creature comforts of the high life in return for the service they are expected to render to society? Moreover, if the luckier lot among them, the ministers, are able to enjoy all privileges imaginable and available, why should they even bear the thought of being left out in the cold?

The people and members of the community that voted for their representatives in parliament are not really loath to provide them with the privileges of high life. But in return the voters can at least expect that their chosen representative in the legislature would dedicate some time out of their busy schedule to sit in the House and dis-

cuss the issues that have to do with their well-being and development.

Unfortunately, one hears of reports in the media from time to time that hardly speak well of our public representatives. The said reports are about the absence of the MPs in the parliamentary sessions in the Jatiya Sangsad. The leader of the House has often expressed her disapproval of such behaviour on the part of the parliamentarians. And it is also not the first time that the MPs have shown such apathy towards attending parliamentary sessions regularly. In this regard, one may recall similar instances of truancy during the sessions of earlier Jatiya Sangsads that attracted censure of the House leader of that time.

Interestingly, similar behaviour of the MPs has been reported from the Indian parliament (Lok Sabha), too. Recently, absence of MPs from the Lok Sabha sessions irked even Sonia Gandhi, president of the Indian National Congress. She has even asked for the list of such absentee parliamentarians so that she might demand explanations from them for such undesirable behaviour.

It appears, this culture (may we call it the culture of 'parliamentary truancy?') is not limited only to Bangladesh. That means India, or maybe other still older democracies, are no stranger to this aberration!

In any case, aberration is aberration and it has to be corrected at all costs. In Bangladesh, in particular, where democracy has been restored at a cost, after a protracted struggle by people from all walks of life, cannot be allowed to be frittered away in this manner. The members of parliament as well as other public representatives should learn to respect the trusting common people who voted for them.

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Fighting climate change and poverty collectively

Thousands of people die every year as a direct result of climate change and related events. Those who survive climate shocks are often driven deeper into poverty because of the impact on their livelihoods, health and security. The challenge to end poverty is bigger than ever in the contexts of climate change.

DWIJEN MALLICK

WE are living in an increasingly unequal and unjust world with the highest amount of wealth and highest number of people living in extreme poverty, who suffer from food insecurity, malnutrition, ill health, joblessness and social insecurity. A recent report of FAO says that currently over one billion people in the Earth cannot take adequate food every day and they go hungry. We are also facing the biggest environmental and developmental problem ever -- global climate change, which poses a serious threat to human security and civilisation. Rapid climate change is a man-made catastrophe.

Over the last decades, there have been growing scientific evidence of human-induced climate change. The last IPCC report in 2007 asserted that climate change is unequivocal and this poses serious threat to human security and civilisation. Over the past two decades, scientific evidence has grown irrefutably that human beings have played a significant role in causing the sharp rise in the average global temperature of 0.7°C in the last century. It is apprehended that there would be another 4°C-7°C rise of average temperature in the current century.

The various negative impacts of climate change are being felt severely, particularly in poor and developing countries. Climate change has increased global food insecurity, hunger, poverty and inequity at the regional level and within many societies. Climate change displaces people in many affected ecosystems (coastal zone, river basin and drought prone areas) and enhances rural to urban migration in many countries. Thus it will increase social conflicts in the developing countries. In his recent statement, UN Under-Secretary General Dr. Achim Steiner has said, "Large

number of people are already on move, with millions more are expected to follow as evidence of climate change mounts."

Linkages between climate change and poverty

Climate change is happening faster than the scientists predicted with grave consequences at local and regional scales. The countries in temperate and tropical Asia are likely to have increased exposure to extreme events, including forest-fire, typhoons and tropical storms, cyclone, tidal surge, floods and landslides, and severe vector-borne diseases. The stresses of climate change are likely to disrupt the ecology of mountain and highland systems in Asia. Glacial melt is also expected to increase under changed climate conditions. Sea level rise would cause large-scale inundation along the vast Asian coastline and recession of flat sandy beaches. The ecological stability of mangroves and coral reefs around Asia would be put at risk. Thousands of people die every year as a direct result of climate change and related events. Those who survive climate shocks are often driven deeper into poverty because of the impact on their livelihoods, health and security. The challenge to end poverty is bigger than ever in the contexts of climate change.

The poor are the most vulnerable to climate change impacts because of their lack of capacity. The effects of climate change are sometimes direct, such as loss of crop yields and food insecurity, water scarcity and growing health risks. The poorest people within the country are critically vulnerable to natural disaster and any severe climatic event that disrupt their lives and livelihoods, because the poor have the least capacity to cope with changing situations and reduce their risks. Again, poverty sometimes increases the level of vulnerability, because the poor often live in

places, have livelihoods that are susceptible to natural disasters and economic crisis; it limits their ability to cope with or recover from the shocks.

Impact on agriculture and food insecurity of the poor

Climate change poses a serious threat to agricultural productivity, particularly in developing countries. Both climate variability and extreme climatic events, like drought, flood, cyclone etc., are affecting agricultural productivity and food security in Asian and African countries. Global wheat production has decreased sharply in the recent years because of increasing maize cultivation destined for bio-fuel production for the rich countries. The poor and marginal sections of people are mainly the victims of this situation. In this context, Professor Sen observed that the stomachs of the poor are competing with the fuel tanks of the rich.

The super cyclonic Sidr and its frequent and prolonged floods caused damage to 30%-40% of crops in 2007 in Bangladesh. Cyclone Aila and the associated tidal surge hit Bangladesh and West Bengal in India in May in 2009. Thousands of people are living on broken embankments without much food, water, good shelters, and face various social insecurities in Bangladesh even six months after the cyclone. The poor became extremely poor and many non-poor have been thrown into poverty and food insecurity by the destruction of Aila.

Climatic extreme events, human displacement and social conflicts

The frequency, intensity and impacts of climatic and natural disasters have increased in recent years. Climatic events such as flood, drought and cyclones first hit the poorest since they live in fringe areas. Death casualty is high among the poor due to natural and climatic disasters. Women, children and elderly people are badly affected by climate extremes. The conventional disaster risk reduction measures are not effective in the contexts of frequency and intensity of climatic disasters. The possible sea level rise will affect low-lying and coastal countries. Millions of people will be displaced from their homes, occu-

pations and livelihood and many will be thrown into poverty. It will enhance rural to urban migration and generate social conflicts in near future. International migration policies and programs are to be reformulated in the light of the influx of climate refugees, particularly from developing countries. Assistance should be provided to enable people to stay within their own community and culture before people are forced to move. Local and regional scale rehabilitation and resettlement should be advanced before the onset of sea level rise to a greater extent. The Aila affects people's need for greater rehabilitation and resettlement supports in Bangladesh.

The key challenges and urgent responses

Now the key challenges are: a) To stop climate change through urgent mitigation measures and create effective framework for post-2012 commitments, with greater participation of both developed and developing countries to halt dangerous climate change; b) Explore how to live in a warmer climate which is now unavoidable; and c) Promote low-carbon economy and lifestyle for the rich who do the most harm through luxuries and over consumption. Mitigating climate change, eradicating poverty and promoting economic growth and political stability all demand the same solutions. The rich countries must reduce their GHG emission urgently and immediately to save the planet and human civilisation.

We hope the upcoming UN conference on climate change in Copenhagen in December will come up with a comprehensive legally binding agreement supported by the political will of the nation states, particularly of the developed countries including the USA. Besides mitigation, the conference may also take strong decisions for adaptation measures and funding for poor countries, food security, poverty-reduction and addressing climate refugees. These are all interrelated and deserve collective effort to fight together. We have to go a long way and must not waste our time anymore.

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Dubai's lapse (of concentration?)

In the coming days the world of finance will put the episode down to contagion phobia, as no one dares pronounce the global recovery from the 2008 banking failure even halfway through. A default by Dubai, the world now knows, would make no financial or sovereign sense.

EDITORIAL DESK, *The Straits Times* (Singapore)

THE markets in Asia have taken the measure of Dubai's debt stunner more calmly, following the day-after panic after Wednesday's notice of a payment delay raised suspicions of a domino default. European markets and Wall Street also have stabilised after suffering 'sympathetic' nerve reactions. In the coming days the world of finance will put the episode down to contagion phobia, as no one dares pronounce the global

recovery from the 2008 banking failure even halfway through. A default by Dubai, the world now knows, would make no financial or sovereign sense. The central bank would not allow it.

Abu Dhabi, the staid senior partner in the United Arab Emirates to the dandy Dubai (and five other constituent emirates in the federation), is rich. It has a tenth of known oil reserves and sovereign wealth fund assets exceeding many nations' GDP. It will demand exacting conditions and exceptions in taking on Dubai's debt and

assets. But it will not permit the worst of Dubai's profligacy to pull down the UAE as a model of financial and logistical servicing and commodities husbandry in a part of the world renowned for its volatility.

There is another deficiency which may have made Dubai's debt liability, estimated at US\$60 billion to \$80 billion, more pernicious than it is. The Lehman Brothers psychosis is a permanent condition. This should be acknowledged. And many people in an assuredly inter-connected world still cannot tell the emirates of the UAE from the Bahrains or the Kuwaits. It is possible a scrambled vision of the Gulf region's collection of tiny sheikhdoms had experts and individuals alike assigning maximum risk of default, and the consequent damage to exposed banks, to what could be contained as an intra-governmental bookkeeping lapse. A lot of the debt is owed to domestic banks.

But, in no way should development experts, bondholders and banks which

finance infrastructure growth downplay the principal lesson of Dubai's lapse, which thankfully does not look fatal. The emirate's ruler, Sheikh Mohammed Rashid Al-Maktoum, had an admirable vision of creating a modern, composite service centre on the Gulf, on the model of Singapore or Hong Kong. But there weren't the realistic demand projections made, and the financing options were always bold. Too much faith was placed on real estate. This was a mirage in the desert, almost. Thailand paid the price for its love of commercial edifices in the 1990s, then came Ireland in the 2000s. Dubai exceeded even that with its fondness for grandiose projects. One indicative study puts present office occupancy at 41%, and values have fallen by 58% against a year ago. The Gulf region will always have need of its Dubais, but the size should fit.

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