

Continuing encroachment of rivers

Time for energetic, decisive action

WHILE the campaign to save the rivers, in and around the city, showed some signs of gaining momentum in recent months and some headway has been made, ground reality now appears to be rather different. The deputy commissioner of Gazipur in his report to the High Court has stated that encroachment on and filling up of the rivers Buriganga, Turag and Balu are going on unabated. And no less a serious worry is that people are regularly dumping sewage and garbage into the rivers.

The BIWTA chairman in his report to the court claimed that they had demolished more than 3,000 structures on the banks of four rivers since 2001. This is no doubt a positive development, but legal complications seem to have slowed down the pace of demolition work as several landowners obtained stay orders from the court. These are matters that have to be addressed to smoothen the clearing operations. There is reason to believe that some encroachers have got documents which are either forged or prepared in collusion with corrupt government employees. Even if the documents are found to be legally obtained, the government has to review the whole thing and deal with the occupants according to the law. After all, encroachment has to be stopped once and for all.

By all indications, the task of removing the illegal structures is a complex one which demands firm and judicious action on the part of the government agencies. First, a survey has to be conducted to ascertain the actual number of encroachers and the nature and gravity of the offence. Secondly, the government agencies concerned have to work with a sense of commitment and urgency. It was their negligence in the past which has created such a situation where the rivers' existence is threatened. Now they have to give a better account of themselves.

The court had issued a directive to the government to stop all such illegal activities, which was quite in keeping with the government's plan of dislodging the encroachers. So, the stage is set for decisive action.

The campaign for saving the rivers is supposed to be moving forward with support from all segments of society. The civil society, media and citizens at large have to stand firmly behind the drive against illegal occupation and pollution of rivers. It is a question of not only saving the rivers, but the city also, which may have to be abandoned in the near future, unless the rivers are brought back to life.

Working for Survival

Appalling lot of the ultra poor children

IT is sad commentary on the socio-economic condition of a country whose more than 52 percent of the children have to work for a livelihood. What it means is that these children, who belong to the extremely poor and marginalised families, have no scope to go to school, being able neither to afford the time nor the money for that. This has emerged from a study conducted by BRAC Development Institute and Save the Children, UK, over a period of five years on the trend of child labour and children involved in economic activities in Bangladesh.

It is a bleak reality in country that is seeking to get more and more of its young population enrolled in schools. And this cannot bode very well for the future of the country given the daunting prospect that Bangladesh would have to contend with in the next two decades, when this group joins the ranks of the youth, with half of them, that are supposed to be contributing to the country's development and growth, remaining illiterate and virtually in the backwaters of national life.

Herein is a serious dichotomy for the government which it must address seriously and urgently. The issue is related to the matter of child labour and child rights which the government, as not only a signatory to international charters and instruments like the United Nations Charter on the rights of Child, but also upholder of its own laws related to child labour, cannot afford to ignore.

We are happy to learn that the government is going to finalise the draft National Children Policy soon, which we hope, will ensure that they are no longer marginalised, downtrodden and vulnerable to exploitation. And as some experts aver, the socio-economic and cultural factors that stand in the way of the elimination of child exploitation are removed.

This matter assumes special significance in view of the fact that the government is trying to make education at all levels, particularly at the primary and secondary, more inclusive and accessible. The PM's remarks on government's plans as related to the primary education under the PEDP-II is encouraging since it attempts, through various measures like midday meal etc, to encourage more and more enrolment in primary schools, which at present extreme poverty discourages.

Some pressing issues of governance

For the last few years we had been suffering from governance crisis. After the election of 2008, it was expected that the governance situation would be improved to a great extent. Of course, we have seen some remarkable improvement in different sectors in the last ten months. However, there are few issues which have created a difficult situation.

PRANAB KUMAR PANDAY

FOR the last few years we had been suffering from governance crisis. After the election of 2008, it was expected that the governance situation would be improved to a great extent. Of course, we have seen some remarkable improvement in different sectors in the last ten months. However, there are few issues which have created a difficult situation.

The issue of crossfire deserves special mention. From the legal and humanitarian grounds it is really unacceptable to see that people are being shot to death. If we consider rule of law and natural justice, the principles demand that the rule should be applied equally to everybody, and everybody should be given the opportunity to defend himself/herself.

Of course, we could argue that the vic-

tims of crossfire are in most cases criminals. Even then, their trial should be held under the regular courts of law. Of course, some could argue that these criminals get benefit of doubt from the court and remain engaged in violent activities when they come out from the court. My point is that from the perspective of law one cannot be treated as a criminal until he/she is proved as one through legal procedure of court.

We see conflicting news about crossfire nowadays. In most cases, family members of the victims are claiming that the victims did not do anything detrimental to the affairs of the state, but they have become victims of crossfire. On the other hand, law-enforcing agencies defend their activities.

If we consider the weaknesses of existing laws, the government could easily made amendments to them so that offenders do not get benefit of doubt. The law-

enforcing agencies could present the matter before the court after extensive investigation, which would help the court to judge properly.

Some cases have put a question mark on the issue of crossfire since, very recently, the honourable High Court has issued a suo moto to the government regarding the issue of crossfire. Even from the humanitarian ground the issue of crossfire cannot be supported since it is unjust.

Tender related violence is another issue that needs to be addressed. Many cases of tender related violence are taking place everyday all over the country. In most cases, supporters of AL and its associate organisations are involved in these incidents. Such activities of the ruling party supporters have already created a negative sentiment among the common people.

Of course, in some cases the government has taken some strong actions against those activities. However, we want that the government should give some exemplary punishment to those involved in tender related violence. If they can do this, it will reduce cases of violence on the one hand and improve the image of the government among the common people on the other.

Another issue is the failure of the intelligence agencies in gathering infor-

mation about some crucial matters like the BDR carnage.

We are passing through a tough time since the Supreme Court, in a landmark verdict, rejected the appeals of five men convicted of assassinating Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Vested interests might try to resist the process of implementation of the verdict. The government would be advised to pay serious attention to this matter and the intelligence agencies should remain alert against such a possibility.

The issue of withdrawal of political cases has created confusion in the mind of ordinary citizens. The government should handle it carefully so that ordinary people do not lose their trust in the government.

The government, especially the prime minister, is working to establish a developed digital Bangladesh by upholding all major characteristics of good governance (rule of law, accountability, transparency, participation etc). However, there are some areas where serious crises are seen in the governance process. The government should make sincere efforts to overcome these crises. Only then will the governance situation improve.

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People's development: A local perspective

For people's development there is no need to rush for resources, instead the priority ought to be to establish a functional relationship between the people and the local governance system. And for that, the target will be to fix the local institutions and connect the people with the system of local governance.

SYED JAHANGEER HAIDER

TWO messages are most frequently heard; develop Digital Bangladesh and transform Bangladesh into a middle-income country by 2020. How meaningful are these messages, or are they pertinent for achieving development in Bangladesh? Instead of giving a short and curt answer to this query, it is preferred that we search a logical and rational response. If we are pursuing development, for whom are we endeavouring? Obviously for the general population, most of whom are not literate, live in rural areas and are already shackled by poverty and multitudes of social, cultural and programmatic shortcomings and impediments.

Over and above these, there are problems of segmented population; women face problems different from those of the men, the poor face problems which are not the concern of the rich, and the rural and urban populace face certainly altogether different problems. On top of that, there are regional shortcomings, like a youth from Nilphamari may not be as smart as a youth from Feni in availing or accessing the different types of opportunities for future investments and enterprises.

Now we may again focus on how viable and pertinent those two messages are in

the pursuit of development goals. Messages are obviously important to move a society from the morass of inaction and backward economic status to a dynamic development process. But will a message that fails to provide insight or shed light on the operational indicators to be pursued as follow-up steps be useful to inspire the population to move forward to achieve any goal, let alone the goals of development?

Messages like "combat illiteracy," "combat poverty," "create job opportunities," "remove unemployment," "establish justice against torture and crimes," "empower the poor and women," "eradicate corruption" are simple, but they could communicate some meaning to a population no matter how uneducated or constrained by their living environ they may be. At least they would find a defined set of indicators to start with and to initiate actions. These may even bring their head and heart in unison to understand and empathise with the concerns and issues.

One cannot but praise the efforts of individuals and people who have already achieved near miracles in terms of achieving development, like reducing infant mortality and earning huge remittances for the country from abroad. Instances are numerous of the commitment and initiatives of the men and women, young and

old, who are now engaged in many sectors (agriculture, horticulture, pisciculture, export etc.) and are demonstrating their talents (which are mostly self-motivated and generated) to achieve remarkable socio-economic targets benefiting the nation.

These individuals, instead of being assisted with technical skills (through training) or supported with finances or other resources, face insurmountable obstacles as they often become victims of the profit-hungry business community and the uncooperative bureaucrats controlling resources of the government.

The country has a people's government which is firmly committed to ensuring pro-people development, alleviating poverty and raising the standard of living. What will expedite development at the grass root level? What is impeding development, which, if removed, can generate energy and momentum for development at the grass root level? The factors holding back development momentum at that level are in the area of people's participation in development. They are:

- The disconnect of people with a system of governance which they could relate to and associate with spontaneously;
- Misunderstandings between the people and the governing institutions -- bureaucratic, political and the local government; and
- Level of people's participation, and the commitment of those representing the government, in the people's interest and priorities.

In the modern system of governance a strong, effective and truly representative local government with support of civil society or people's associations are the

best functional operatives, which can fulfill the above three conditions needed to expedite people's development at the grass roots level. What is happening in the areas of local government and people's groups (or the informal pressure groups representing people's interests) are matters of serious analysis.

The only local government that used to be somewhat functional so far was the Union Parishad and the recently established Upazilla Parishad through franchise. But these are mired with serious problems. The Upazilla Parishad is currently stuck in legal and administrative conflicts regarding the tasks and status of the elected representatives and the bureaucracy headed by the UNO. Election for Union Parishad is rare and, the institution is locked in traditional functions like disbursing funds/wheat for construction works, and most of the members are unaware of their role in the community and are often influenced by the local elites.

The government is trying to get funds from the Copenhagen Funds for Climate Change, which is praiseworthy. But, if the government succeeds in obtaining the fund, who will spend it and how will it be spent, and will the people be benefited?

For people's development there is no need to rush for resources, instead the priority ought to be to establish a functional relationship between the people and the local governance system. And for that, the target will be to fix the local institutions and connect the people with the system of local governance.

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Andhra split opens up a Pandora's box

There could still be an effort to delay the process necessary for the creation of Telangana through simulated disputes, like over the status of Hyderabad, which, geographically and historically is the natural capital of Telangana.

M.J. AKBAR

THE public school of politics has only one subject in its tutorials: Events. The big boys of Delhi have been playing truant, lulled by an imposter's mantra. Two victories in five years convinced them that delay is a solution.

Do not underestimate the siren call of procrastination. Fudge always remains an option when you have to straddle irreconcilables like partition and unity demands. There could still be an effort to delay the process necessary for the creation of Telangana through simulated disputes, like over the status of Hyderabad, which, geographically and historically is the natural capital of Telangana.

If Delhi had been as worried over the climate change in Hyderabad as it was over climate change in Copenhagen, it would have foreseen the tsunami. But Union Home Minister P. Chidambaram did not whisper the word 'Telangana' until he was compelled to talk of nothing else. The speed with which the government slipped from stonewall to capitulation was bound to trigger anger in those who felt they had lost out. The government had five years to

manage reconciliation; it did nothing. The Congress made a deal with

K. Chandrashekhara Rao in 2004 in order to defeat Chandrababu Naidu, and forgot the boatman once it had crossed the river. Complacency is a criminal offence in public life. The verdict may be delayed, but will not be denied.

In 2009, two constituencies tipped Congress into the comfort zone where it was seemingly safe from the threat of foes and nagging of friends -- Andhra Pradesh and the Muslim vote. Within six months both have sent a powerful message: Deliver or face the consequences.

Drift has boxed the government into a lose-lose situation. If Congress had accepted Telangana a day before Rao began his fast, Rao would have been history, rather than an historic figure. Delhi has also sent a dangerous signal to half a dozen disparate stakeholders in a new map of India: Mere crying won't help; in order to get milk you need to pick up the kitchen knife and threaten murder or suicide. As also, that milk comes in cartons rather than by the glass. The hills of Darjeeling have ears, as do the sugarcane stalks of western Uttar Pradesh.

Behind all the sound, fury, mistakes and exultation, the promise of Telangana marks a significant but largely unnoticed shift in the dynamics of federalism. Language was the basis on which the States Reorganisation Commission, consisting of Sayyid Fazl Ali, H.N. Kunzru and K.M. Pannikar re-fashioned India's internal geography.

The untidy parts were sorted out under public pressure -- Maharashtra in 1960, Punjab in 1966 -- but once again on the basis of language. Only hill regions and the North East were offered criteria that were at a slight variance.

The shift came, logically enough, when the nation's priorities changed. Once it was evident that no regional language, or culture, was under threat from unitary pressures, language melted as a focal point of identity. The new federal politics is determined by economics. Telangana and the rest of Andhra speak the same language, but have diametrically conflicting economic interests. Telangana, in fact, accuses coastal Andhra of exploiting its resources.

This fundamental change was evident in 2000, when Uttaranchal, Jharkhand and Chattisgarh were created. Parent and newborn shared the same language. Indeed, the absence of fuss nine years ago is a template in consensus building, in the difference between negotiation and appeasement. Wounds were treated before gangrene could set in.

The seed of every demand lies in the

perception of economic neglect, in the belief of a people that they have been left out of the story of rising India. Small then becomes sensible because big has proved to be bogus.

The ferment in the second decisive Congress constituency, Muslims, also has everything to do with economics. The dialectic is faith-based because Muslims have a nationwide presence rather than any specific space. Dr. Manmohan Singh has sought to pre-empt a crisis by promising to table the Ranganath Mishra Commission report before the end of the current session of parliament, but that will be only the beginning of his problems.

The Commission has recommended 15% reservation in all government jobs, educational seats and resources for minorities, 10% of which is to be allotted for Muslims. Muslims will treat this as a benchmark and demand to know what action has been taken. None so far; since any action might fuel an equal and opposite reaction. Inaction has served Congress well, for Muslims did not raise the matter in the last elections since they understood the political fallout. But that alibi has been used and cannot be recycled.

The Congress dilemma is familiar to those who win elections: A promise that restores you, can always return to haunt you.

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