

Launch disaster enquiry report

Implement the recommendations quickly

IT is good not only to see enquiry committees, formed to investigate accidents and disasters, complete their task on time but also nice to have the major findings disclosed to the public.

The enquiry committees on two recent launch disasters, that in Bhola on the day before Eid-ul-Azha and the other in Kishoreganj only a week after that, have made public their findings and recommendations.

The two reports confirm what had been reported by the media as the possible causes of the accidents. The committee enquiring into the mishap in which Coco-4 was involved has identified seven causes why the launch capsized; the major reasons are overloading and apathy of the staff towards passenger safety. Incompetence of the motorboat operator has been cited as the cause for the Kishoreganj mishap.

It is a shame that greed of the staff of the motor vessel Coco-4, which had previously been involved in another accident, as well as their ineptness in managing passengers' safety, had caused the accident. That the said vessel picked up passengers enroute in the midstream of rivers from smaller passenger crafts, when the vessel was already overloaded, defies belief. But no less culpable, we must emphasise, are the government agencies meant to exercise supervision on errant launch owners and staff. The unholy nexus between the BIWTA staff, who gave false voyage declaration, and the launch employees, is clearly evident from the report

It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that in the public transportation sector, perhaps the most neglected and the worst managed is river transport. This is an undesirable state of affairs given that it is the riverways and riverine transport that most Bangladeshis adopt, both for travel and transportation of goods.

The committees have made a large number of recommendations that must be acted upon without delay. We note that a committee has been formed by the Shipping Ministry to go through the recommendations and suggest ways to implement those, within fifteen days. The 34 recommendations that the two committees have made between them may seem quite a handful but many of those have to do with implementing the existing rules and exercising control as per the laid down regulations.

We believe that whatever are the recommendations, it will ultimately depend on the agencies that are tasked to ensure safety of the passengers, competence of the crew members, serviceability of the river crafts, safety of the river routes, and the people that man those agencies, working with honesty and sincerity, to reduce the incidence of launch mishaps.

Farm credit operation invigorated

Institutional thrust making a difference

THERE has been a marked improvement in the volume and quality of credit flow to the agriculture sector. The quality is in the timeliness of, and easy accessibility to, farm credits. To top it off, real farmers are being the beneficiaries with an outreach to the rural doorsteps. These features have had a multiplier effect with the marked increase in the volume of credit.

Concomitantly, and in time with a guaranteed sustenance of the programme, this is likely to have a salubrious impact on the farm sector, the largest employer of our workforce and the biggest contributor to the country's GDP. It also happens to be the sector which holds the key to self-sufficiency in food-stuffs underpinning food security as such.

The loan recovery in agriculture sector improving, the volume of credit flow has marked a rise. Farm credit disbursement during July-November of the current fiscal stood at Tk 4,249 crore compared to Tk 3,378 crore in the same period last year. What is particularly noticeable and heartening is the participation of private sector banks accounting for a 59 per cent increase over the previous year's level. The public sector banks' share too increased, by 17 per cent.

The Bangladesh Bank's persistent and energetic efforts with the commercial banks, both in the state and private sector have succeeded in securing cooperation of the banking system as a whole in bolstering agriculture credit operations in a significant way. The banks are setting themselves targets and the central bank is playing a catalytic role with the help of a hundred newly appointed assistant directors, among other steps taken.

Importantly, apart from embracing a developmental role in the economy, the banks may have been propelled by the fact that small and medium farmers are apt to pay back their loans in contrast to the big borrowers who have a tendency to default. As if to stimulate them further, the rate of default among farmers has actually marked a decline. All this has been made possible in large part, it seems, by the introduction of a system of loan disbursement based on camping amidst the rural folks that has increased credit flow as well as improving loan recovery.

E-parliament for Bangladesh

ICT can be instrumental in strengthening citizen engagement, providing innovative ways to interact with citizens, as well as enable their access to parliamentary proceedings and documents.

LUTFOR RAHMAN

E-parliaments provide better service delivery of parliaments to citizens of their respective country. For the Bangladesh Parliament, ICT can be used as a tool for greater transparency and accountability, and a platform for public consultation and interaction with citizens. A survey conducted by an international organisation, about e-parliaments and use of technology, finds that parliaments are increasingly using new technologies to reach people mostly in a passive way -- making more information available in different formats. Of the 90 countries surveyed, 77 stated they use ICT in some way to improve their work. They found disparity between the work done in the developing world and the developed world, but the hunger and desire for using new technologies is very strong in most of the developing countries.

A similar situation was observed in a recent event held in Dhaka, where a significant number of parliament members attended to discuss an ICT-based Parliament in Bangladesh. Very impressive and positive discussions went on in the event. Most MPs very openly stated their inabilities in using new technologies, particularly the internet, in their office work. But they realised very much the importance of ICT at the present age of the globalisation. They also understood how much they lose due to a lack of awareness of ICT. This is absolutely a congenial atmosphere for a country to become self-reliant in technology. The global experience enable us

to learn how the implementation of e-parliament is possible in a developing country like Bangladesh, through empowerment of respected members of parliament (MPs).

The situation was not like this in the mid-nineties when the Commonwealth Science Council (CSC) of the Commonwealth Secretariat, based in London, tried to empower policy makers, decision-makers, technocrats, bureaucrats, scientists, technologists, researchers and medical professionals with ICT in its member countries. Bangladesh is a member country of the Commonwealth as well as the United Nations. Both organisations have research divisions for social, cultural, scientific and technological development in their member countries. They identify the needs of a country to reduce the technology gaps with other countries and adopt technology development programmes in the respective countries.

Unfortunately many countries cannot avail themselves of these opportunities, due to a shortage of relevant experts or lack of cooperation from their respective governments. In the mid-nineties, Bangladesh faced a similar situation due to a lack of awareness among policy makers and decision makers, when the Commonwealth identified Bangladesh as a country that required technological development to catch up with the rest of the world. They came forward with the project idea of empowering senior policy makers, decision-makers and others in senior positions. The director of the CSC identified this writer to take responsibility for organising the

Commonwealth-formulated ICT programmes in Bangladesh. It was a much harder job to attract participants to learn something that their children or grandchildren do. The organiser claims partial success because not only male but also female professionals accepted the invitation and got training. At that time, only Bangladesh and Tanzania succeeded in implementing ICT courses under the auspices of the CSC.

There are many risks, as any move to e-government or e-commerce entails massive social transformation and raises political risks. Parliaments have to overcome their own internal regulations and rules that inhibit transparency and accountability, and if changed, would make technology more effective. There is strong support and funding from the donor community for e-government that is seen as "having the ability to transform relations with citizens, business and other arms of government. E-government aims to make the interaction between government and the citizens more friendly, convenient, transparent and inexpensive" (Bassat, 2006).

For parliaments, the benefits of ICT can be enormous. ICT can make the democratic process more transparent, accessible and accountable, by facilitating access of members of parliaments, parliamentary administrations, media and citizens to information and services. ICT can be instrumental in strengthening citizen engagement, providing innovative ways to interact with citizens, as well as enable their access to parliamentary proceedings and documents. The application of ICT to internal practices and services can help to make parliaments more efficient in carrying out their legislative, oversight and representational functions. Also, ICT can help connect parliamentarians and parliamentary institutions with their counterparts, thus strengthening their

knowledge and information on the issues they confront. Under the e-parliamentary system, members will be able to file their queries to the government 'online', leading to speedy and paperless flow of information across the treasury and opposition benches. The MPs can send their questions to the Speaker's office via the internet under the new system. Parliaments, the cradle of democracy, have critical roles to play by presenting the right values and policy directions to nations.

Like the CSC-initiated ICT programme, the United Nations University (UNU) at Bonn, Germany, has taken an excellent initiative for reducing the digital gaps among member countries through its Science Connect Country Ambassador in the respective country. These Ambassadors believe in the vision of science connect and support the expansion of scientific activities throughout the world. They promote the Science Connect initiative as a place for cooperation with academia, universities, and organisations that need science-based technology support. The initiative first taken in Europe, then Africa and recently in (Bangladesh) Asia, gives responsibility to this writer as the Science Connect Country Ambassador for Bangladesh. If translated in the local language, Bangla, it becomes Bangladesh-Biggaan-Doot. Keeping the example of CSC-formulated ICT program in front, it is expected that the present government and the authority concerned will utilise the full potential of the Bangladesh-Biggaan-Doot in implementing an e-parliament in the Digital Bangladesh, under the auspices of the United Nations University.

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Are allied efforts succeeding in Afghanistan?

Obama's decision to have a troop surge has perhaps been politically motivated but any chance of salvaging an acceptable outcome will definitely hinge not on what American and allied soldiers can do on the battlefield, but on putting together a coherent political strategy.

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AWARE of my interest about Afghanistan, one of my friends recently presented me with a copy of *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, an author of Afghan origin currently living in the United States. A bestseller (has sold more than two million copies), the book vividly portrays the social background of that war-torn country and the societal effects that has taken place over the last thirty years in Kabul and the adjoining regions, as a result of insurgency and terrorism. I hope President Obama has read it. It provides a rare insight into what is happening in Afghanistan and why.

Like other analysts, I have also reflected carefully on President Barack Obama's speech of December 1, 2009, delivered at the United States Military Academy at West Point. He highlighted three core elements of US strategy in Afghanistan: the military effort to create the conditions for a transition; a civilian surge that reinforces positive action; and how a more effective partnership can be put in place with Pakistan. In this context, he also pointed out that the Iraq war was coming to a responsible end and that all US troops will be out of Iraq by the end of 2011.

He then went on to point out that his aim now was to better coordinate the military and civilian efforts of US and the NATO forces. He also recognised that "huge challenges remain" and that "Afghanistan is not lost, but for several years it has moved backwards." He also added that "there is no imminent threat of the government being overthrown, but the Taliban has gained momentum." Such candor, instead of spin, was refreshing.

It appears that pursuant to Obama's orders, the first U.S. forces in the surge will be deployed within weeks. 1,500 troops from an infantry battalion task force at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina will head to Afghanistan later this month, and will be followed by the further deployment of another 13,500 by the end of spring, including an additional 6,200 Marines from Regimental Combat Team-2 at Camp Lejeune; 800 from I Marine Expeditionary Force at Camp Pendleton, California; 3,400 troops from a brigade combat team of the 1st Brigade, 10th Mountain Division from Fort Drum, New York; and 4,100 support forces. The rest, out of the total additional pledged 30,000, will follow subsequently. It is being hoped by the Obama Administration that this extra presence will increase the Allied ability to train the Afghan security forces so that more Afghans can get into the fight, thus helping to create conditions that would enable the United States to transfer responsibility to the Afghans sooner than later.

This indicates the seriousness of the US strategy. However, not much has been heard from the other countries that have an armed presence in Afghanistan, about sending further reinforcements. Some observers have hinted that they have not been so forthcoming as they are not sure that such a surge will work in a war, where the Afghan partner is corrupt and has become controversial after the recently concluded presidential election. France and Germany have been particularly silent.

A few analysts, including retired Russian generals involved in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan have already started drawing parallels of the US presence in Afghanistan

with what happened in Vietnam. They, in this regard, are also highlighting that future operations through additional troops will be meaningless unless it is in support of a sustainable political system. They are also stressing that the Indochina parallel seems valid given that, as in Vietnam, America's Afghan allies are unviable.

No one in his right senses should seek a precipitate withdrawal of the US and NATO presence from Afghanistan. However, it is equally true that the whole scenario has to be viewed within the multifaceted paradigm where politics and diplomacy are the fundamentals, and where progress cannot be achieved unless security improves. In addition, there has to be recognition that even the most limited stabilisation program will founder, unless all the regional powers, including Iran, become parties to it. This is vital because of the complexities created through the presence of tribalism and the sectarian divide within Afghanistan. The situation also becomes more intricate because a large section of the population, the Pashtuns, an important component for stability, dislikes both the Western "occupiers" and also the present Kabul regime. Progress will depend, as General McChrystal has correctly diagnosed, on reaching accommodations with the tribes from the bottom up, not the top down.

Obama's decision to have a troop surge has perhaps been politically motivated but any chance of salvaging an acceptable outcome will definitely hinge not on what American and allied soldiers can do on the battlefield, but on putting together a coherent political strategy.

I also tend to agree with the general view that the Taliban commander Mullah Omar might have got the wrong message from Obama's speech and might now focus more on the premise that the US will start their withdrawal in 18 months. It would be appropriate here to recall Mullah Omar's earlier comment that "they may have the watches, but we have the time." I hope Obama has not inadvertently given volume to that message. I can understand the temptation of setting timelines and exit strategies to reassure the domestic audience, but one must remem-

ber that it also tells the opposite party how long they have to wait before the US and her Allies give up.

Instead, it might have been better to set milestones and targets for the growth and professionalisation of the Afghan Army and police, and the handing over of functions to Afghan structures before any pull-out would commence. One hopes that such a transparent public document can still be prepared for Afghanistan. From that point of view, it could be similar to the Mission Implementation Plan that set forth a visible road map of progress for Bosnia during the height of instability.

One need hardly reiterate that for any plan to succeed in Afghanistan, one has to take into cognisance that its demography is not only tribal in character, but that a Western-style centralised constitution might be perceived as being against the grain of Afghan society. From that point of view, Obama's suggestion that the US "will support efforts by the Afghan government to open the door to those Taleban who abandon violence and respect the human rights of their fellow citizens" has been a good step. However, it can only work if America is able to persuade the restive rural Afghanistan that Karzai has a credible and attainable Afghan domestic and regional strategy.

At this point, one needs to also underline that little progress can be made toward regional stability without reducing tensions between Pakistan and India. India's dalliance with the Afghan government, which has been given hundreds of millions of dollars in Indian aid, has increased the deep paranoia of the Pakistani army and intelligence service. Such a status quo, in all likelihood, can only lead powerful elements of Pakistan's security forces to continue to support Islamic militants as proxies against India. The US and its Allies, within this framework, will also have to agree on a wider regional strategy that would include Russia and China. Without this, success will be much more difficult.

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Nuclear energy: Beneficial uses

Radioactive and stable isotopes are used peacefully throughout the world in many sectors, including agriculture, medicine, industry, and research.

MD. TARIQUL ISLAM

THE word "Nuclear" disallows people to not think deeply about its benefits. However, radioactive and stable isotopes are used peacefully throughout the world in many sectors, including agriculture, medicine, industry, and research. Isotopes are different types of atoms (nuclides) of the same chemical element, each having a different number of neutrons. In many applications, isotopes have no substitute and in most others, they are more effective and cheaper than alternative techniques or processes. About 50 countries have significant isotope production capacities, and many others have smaller capacities.

The use of radiation and isotope techniques in agriculture has played an important role in increasing food production over the world. More than 2000 improved crop varieties have been developed using nuclear

techniques. Bangladesh Institute of Nuclear Agriculture has so far released 42 mutant varieties of different crops (rice-7, mustard-6, groundnut-4, mungbean-7, lentil-4, chickpea-4, sesame-1, jute-3, tomato-5, black gram-1). Physical mutagens such as gamma rays, x-rays, and chemical mutagens such as ethyl methane sulphate, sodium azide etc. are utilised for bringing about genetic changes within a crop variety, in terms of earliness, nutritional quality, disease resistance, water, salinity, temperature stress tolerance and other characters.

Radioisotopes (^{32}P , ^{35}S , ^{14}C , ^{60}Co , etc.) and stable isotopes (^{15}N , ^{18}O , ^2H etc.) are widely used in the study of fertiliser use efficiency and uptake of nutrients and their physiological functions in plants, measurement of biological nitrogen fixation by legumes, exploration of water resources and hydrology, understanding of biochemical pathways, dynamics of nutrients in soil including loss by leaching, and insecticide use and

agrochemical residue studies. Using isotopic tracer technique in fertiliser studies, the amount of added fertiliser take up by plants can be indicated, and the method of application, placement and management can be effectively evaluated. Radioisotopes ^{14}C and ^{32}P are used in translocation -- movement of photosynthetic materials -- and root growth studies. At very low doses, irradiation inhibits regrowth or sprouting in stored potatoes, onions and garlic, delays ripening and over-ripening of fruits, and substitutes chemical fumigants used to control insect pests in stored rice, wheat flour, pulses, gram flour (besan), dry fruits, nuts, spices, dry fish etc. At high doses irradiation pasteurises or retards spoilage of meat, poultry, and fishery products by killing bacteria. At still higher doses, irradiation can improve quality and microbial safety of spices and dry herbs. Radiation processing leaves no residue in food and it is an eco-friendly technology.

Radioimmunoassay and related nuclear techniques are also widely used in the study of animal nutritional and reproduction problems, and animal disease diagnosis.

Radioactive dating gives us an approximate age of rock or material containing radioactive atoms. For example, for a measurement of a fraction of uranium atom,

which has decayed into lead, knowing the half-life of uranium tells us how old the rock is. Metal casting can be tested for cracks by putting them in baths of radioactive salts. The castings are then inspected for radioactivity to find out any penetration of salts into cracks. Absence of salt penetration indicates absence of cracks. The optical microscopes developed in physics are extensively used in the study of biological samples.

Electron microscope, X-rays and radioisotopes are used widely in medical science. Gamma rays emitted by the radioisotopes can be used in the treatment of cancer. These radiations tend to destroy cancerous cells and the way can arrest the spreading of the cancerous cells. ^{60}Co is used in the treatment of tumours and cancers. In order to find if blood is circulating to a wound or not, a radioactive isotope is injected into the blood stream. After a time period, blood from the wound is examined for its radioactivity. If no radioactive isotope is detected, it means that passage of blood is hindered.

^{32}P is used for relief in leukemia and ^{131}I is used in the treatment of goiter.

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