

New threat to Haikkar canal

Firm action must be taken against encroachment everywhere

HERE is bad news again from the environment front. Despite public concerns about canals, lakes and other water bodies being filled in with sand and stone by unscrupulous elements, despite administrative and even judicial measures to put a stop to such encroachment, there seems to have been little improvement in the situation. It is true that of late the authorities have moved toward reclaiming many canals and similar water bodies in and around the nation's capital. It is equally, and sadly, true that in some way or the other the nefarious elements responsible for turning these water bodies into something of a wasteland manage to sneak back to the scene and begin their dark work all over again.

One has only to observe the audacity with which a real estate firm is busy piling up sand only three feet away from the Haikkar canal at Rayerbazar. There are all the reasons for public outrage about such an act. The first is that the canal runs by the Martyred Intellectuals Monument around which, on ethical considerations, there should be no construction or any activity that will mar the solemnity of the memorial. Besides -- and this is the second reason -- there is a standing directive from the Public Works Department prohibiting any construction around the memorial. Another reason is the flimsy excuse or questionable arguments as well as documents these elements (in this case the real estate firm) come up with to defend their work. A representative of the firm has tried to convince people that the construction is being done through financial deals with local people and that it will not lead to any clogging up of an already comatose canal. That is not a good enough explanation.

And it is not good enough because of two very basic reasons. In the first place, any construction beside a canal, lake or river cannot but lead to a slow demise of the water body. That has been our experience over the years and that is why we are all today desperate about recovering what we have lost so far. In the second, it is unethical and absolutely a moral outrage to have any edifice built around a national monument. There is something called heritage. Will the authorities now intervene to remove these threats to Haikkar canal and similar threats to other canals and rivers elsewhere?

One is quite perturbed at such regular incidents of developers and sundry other bodies defying the government and going ahead with their own plans in places where they should not be. Are they more powerful than the government of the country? Can they with impunity defy the authorities and humiliate citizens day after day by their brazen activities? Let there be a stop to all that. Firmness pays. Since appeals to good sense do not seem to be working, it is time for tough action. Let it begin through putting an end to that construction by the Haikkar canal and beside the Martyred Intellectuals Monument.

Prisons without doctors

Take steps before it gets worse

IT is dreadful revelation that 57 out of 67 prisons across the country do not have a single doctor to come to the aid of the inmates during illness. What is more atrocious is that prisoners serving rigorous imprisonment are given the task of nursing the patients because of the absence of trained nurses. We wonder what would the situation look like if epidemic of an infectious disease breaks out in any one of those prisons. As there would be no place to shift thousands of prisoners within a short time it is only probable that a large number of them would get infected and face death or impairment of health.

The back-page news item in this daily says that the jail authorities have only 13 doctors for a total of 90,000 prisoners all over the country.

Though the Directorate of Prisons had applied for 58 additional doctors in 2007 to join a team of 19 doctors in 16 jails, no new doctor has been given posting till date. There is more to the sheer mismanagement of the jails, which became conspicuous in the report. In addition to non-availability of doctors, over 50 jails have no hospital facilities and as a result, the authorities have to send critical patients to nearby hospitals for treatment.

But that mostly happens in the case of some high-profile prisoners who use power and money to get the facilities. According to the Inspector General of Prisons doctors do not show interest in getting posted at prisons since outdoor practice is prohibited. Despite a direction given in the jail code the sum of Tk. 5,000 as non-practicing allowance is not being given to the doctors thereby causing their frustration to heighten further.

There is no denying that a place crammed with human beings, whether law-breakers or not, must have certain facilities to make the place worth living. Denying those facilities is absolute violation of human rights. Healthcare is a basic right of all humans; therefore, having no medical officer in a prison house where thousands of convicts have to live for years together cannot be a non-priority. It should have been ensured before taking in prisoners. The government will have to find doctors and give them the required benefits so that they may offer the services needed in the prisons.

Lessons from Haiti

Haiti should be an urgent wake up call for us. We can hardly afford to be caught napping while a catastrophe of Haitian magnitude might sneak upon us, spelling doom for the population.

SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

THE devastation of Port au Prince, the capital of the Central American state of Haiti, has made it glaringly evident what havoc a powerful earthquake can wreak on a country that is poor and not well-prepared to face a natural calamity of colossal magnitude. Though this island nation is no stranger to calamities, especially sea-borne ones such as hurricanes, the quake that struck it last Tuesday afternoon was the first of its kind in the last 200 years.

The entire city is now beyond recognition. It is a tangled mess of twisted wreckage of buildings everywhere, with people -- dead, dying and wounded -- trapped inside them. The merciless Nature seems to have descended on this poor island nation with all its destructive fury.

It is not only the shanties owned by the poor that became the first casualty of the quake shock, but the proudest structures of the Haitian capital also met with an identical fate. For instance, the presidential palace itself bears testimony to that great force of devastation. Another sad upshot of the Haitian tremor is that the head of the UN mission in Haiti is a victim of the catastrophe along with a number of his personnel.

According to a rough estimate by the American Health Organisation, some 100,000 people may have perished under

the rubbles of Haiti quake. The number, however, is still guesswork and the real picture of the death and devastation will be available only after the rescue operation is complete.

The situation at the moment is in a state of utter desperation. Even on the fourth day after the cataclysm had occurred, the victims still alive, but remaining inside the clogged up ruins have found no help from the rescue operators. Oddly though, rescue teams with enough food, water, clothes and medical help have been pouring into Port-au-Prince.

The US, for example, has mobilised one of history's biggest rescue operation in Haiti and some nine to ten thousand of its troops are on their way to Haiti supported by an aircraft carrier with helicopters for carrying out rescue operations alongside a declaration of US\$100 million in aid.

And it is not only US, the UN, too, has made an urgent appeal to the world for \$526 million in aid of the quake victims. In fact, the entire world, including the major economic powers, has expressed solidarity with the hapless people of Haiti.

Now, has this demonstration of unforeseen compassion and goodwill towards the Haitians automatically translated into real help on the ground? Quite to the contrary.

The ground reality is that the people of Haiti are now growingly getting frustrated

and angry as nothing concrete has so far materialised to salvage the victims of the quake.

All this show of benevolence from the global community notwithstanding, the situation in Haiti is extremely desperate as has been made obvious from the words of John Holmes, the UN humanitarian chief: "This is a huge and a horrifying catastrophe, the full consequences of which we do not know."

This is the stark truth in the face of a devastation of this scale. That is so because an earthquake always comes out of the blue and allows no time for taking preparations against it.

To all appearances, the earthquake has completely immobilised Haiti. While we hope that the affected people of that country would soon get the full benefit of the international drive launched to help the suffering people of this island state, we would in the same breath like to turn our attention home and see what our own situation would be in the face of a calamity of this scale.

Like Haiti, we are also one of the least developed countries on earth. Our people's resilience against recurring floods and cyclones from the Bay of Bengal and the accompanying tidal surges are well-known. Even at the government level, our preparedness to face such disasters has been acclaimed internationally. But what is important to note here is that all our experiences and preparedness against natural disasters are limited to fighting floods and cyclones.

What if an earthquake of magnitude comparable to the one that devastated Haiti strikes us? And given the last few years' record, we have been occasionally

experiencing repeated tremors of varying magnitudes.

But the tremors that have been rattling Bangladesh in recent years are also all not very small ones. One of the quakes that struck the coastal city of Chittagong in the last week of November, 2007 took its toll as it brought down a five-storey building, killing some 23 of its occupants. Earlier, in the same month of that year, a tremor of still higher intensity at 6 on the Richter scale hit Chittagong and Rangamati in the Hill districts, creating a crack in the hills. Even as recently as December last year, a tremor of 5.7 magnitude rattled Dhaka and other parts of the country.

In fact, the whole country, from its southern parts to the northern and north-eastern districts to the centre, is situated in a high risk, quake-prone zone. The high frequency of the tremor strikes in recent years is a telltale sign of an impending cataclysm anytime in the future.

Experts are of the view that a quake strike comparable to the Haitian scale will damage 50 percent of the city's buildings in one go, if only due to the unplanned nature of its urbanisation and the poor structure of the buildings. Worse still, most of the structures do not meet the requirements of the national building code. Also consider the high density of population and the shanties teeming with people.

To top it all, think of the condition of our preparedness! The least said about it the better.

So, Haiti should be an urgent wake up call for us. We can hardly afford to be caught napping while a catastrophe of Haitian magnitude might sneak upon us, spelling doom for the population.

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A post-secular nation?

Continuing terrorism by a small segment of Muslims in the name of jihad against "infidels" and their reportage in the global media have resulted in the framing of Western attitude towards the Muslims

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

MUSLIMS, the world over, are in a quandary. Continuing terrorism by a small segment of Muslims in the name of jihad against "infidels" and their reportage in the global media have resulted in the framing of Western attitude towards the Muslims as a people chained to their roots and unable to adapt their system of politico-economic governance and social life in accordance with democratic principles understood "as a universal ideal (and) as the capacity of men to control their life in society through communicative reason and public institutions (Carlo Galli of University of Bologna-Reset Sept/Oct 2007)."

Only about a quarter of Britons, reveals a recent survey of British social attitudes, have favourable views about Muslims. Likewise, the Islamic Society of Britain, in a survey conducted in 2002, found a considerable part of British society suspicious of Muslim diaspora after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. More than two-thirds blamed the Muslim community of doing little or nothing to promote tolerance towards other faiths though admitting that their own values have very little in common with that of the Muslims.

The dissonance between the two major "civilisations" has found its way from academic discussions to real world discriminations against the Muslims condemned to poverty, low pay, unemployment and social

exclusion, with inevitable rebellion by second generation Muslim immigrants in Western countries who, having little ties with the "homeland" of their ancestors, feel aggrieved by the attack on their culture.

The Swiss vote banning construction of minarets and hefty fine on Muslim women wearing veils in France are some examples of Western attempts to impose their mores on Muslim society abroad. This brings up the question of the world stepping into "post-secular" period defined by German sociologist Jurgen Habermas as societies where religion lays claims to public influence and relevance beyond the religious arena, destroying secularist certainty that religion would eventually disappear in the face of accelerated modernisation (*A post-secular society? What does it mean, 10-09-2008*).

The resurgence of religion, according to Habermas, has been due to missionary expansion, fundamentalist radicalisation, and political instrumentalisation of the potential for violence "innate in many religions of the world." Patrick Glynn (George Washington University) thinks that the West is "entering a new chapter in its intellectual history...intermarriage of scientific and theological insight may well presage a new post-secular stage in Western thought."

Hitherto the affluent West was considered to be secular because of the wealth they possessed. They found little need to seek divinity's help for acquisition of material

gains. The US, however, was always regarded an exception among the developed economies where religion plays an important role in public affairs, as evidenced during the election of George W. Bush to the presidency and the negative influence of the Jewish lobby in US politics noted by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt's (*The Israeli lobby and US foreign Policy-March 2006*) postulation that Israel is a strategic liability for the US and contributes significantly to anti-American feeling in the Islamic world.

Undoubtedly, the terrorism by the Taliban and al-Qaeda has contributed to growing Western conviction of Islam's inability to conform to the rigours of liberal democracy because, in the words of Jurgen Habermas, "their form of worship combines spiritualism and adventism with rigid moral conceptions and literal adherence to the holy scriptures."

It is not difficult to understand Western hesitation to accept Islamic claim to democracy because democratic order cannot be imposed by its authors, and religious citizens and communities are expected to appropriate the secular principles that a multicultural society would demand. The quest for material advancement would necessitate the closest possible interaction with the West by developing countries, and leave aside the quarrels on religion and certainly oppose the al-Qaeda variety of terrorism that aims at establishment of theocratic system of governance in both the Muslim and non-Muslim countries through violent means.

One way, suggests Ali Eteraz, an outstanding scholar at the US Justice Department (*Pakistan is already an Islamic State-Dissent*), that Pakistan's deliverance would not come from the dilution of the 1973

Constitution that made Islam the state religion, albeit a pragmatic strategy given Pakistan's flirtation with religion by successive military rulers and no less by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, but through deletion of religion from the state governance. But then the Red Mosque incident amply demonstrated that highlighting one's grievances through the lens of Islam had thoroughly seeped into the core of Pakistani society.

What is seemingly difficult for Pakistan may not be so difficult for Bangladesh. Traditionally, Bangladeshis have peacefully co-existed with people of other faiths. Bangladesh is not familiar with sectarian conflict within Islam. Although initially Bangladesh opted for a secular nationalist ideology as embodied in its Constitution, the principle of secularism was subsequently replaced by a commitment to the Islamic way of life through a series of constitutional amendments and government proclamations between 1977 and 1988.

The amendments included that the principles of absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah, nationalism, democracy and socialism -- meaning economic and social justice -- together with the principles derived from them shall constitute the fundamental principles of state policy. Given the opportunity provided by the Supreme Court, which declared the 5th amendment to the Constitution illegal, our political leaders may opt for deletion of both the 5th and the 8th amendments to the Constitution and demonstrate the superiority of transformational leadership over a transactional one. It would solidify the people into one and avoid socio-economic exclusion of any group.

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Arsenic in paddy

A relevant but unanswered question is whether this level of arsenic in the grains is a health threat. While The Daily Star article is rather ominous in its tone, some analysis based on WHO and Fao data leads to a less threatening conclusion.

ALEXIS MOSQUERA and NOUSHI RAHMAN

ON January 14, 2010, *The Daily Star* reported an increase in the accumulation of arsenic levels in the topsoil of agricultural lands that are irrigated by arsenic-rich groundwater. The article referred to a recent study by Professor Badruzzaman and Professor Ali (both of Buet). In their study, the professors reported that paddy grown on lands that have been irrigated by arsenic-rich groundwater contain up to 0.3 milligrams (300 micrograms) of arsenic per kilogram of paddy. A relevant but unanswered question is whether this level of arsenic in the grains is a health threat. While the Daily Star article is rather ominous in its tone, some analysis based on WHO and FAO data leads to a less threatening conclusion.

World Health Organization (WHO) and Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) have been concerned with arsenic for sev-

eral decades now. In 1967, WHO established the maximum allowable daily load (MADL) of arsenic as 50 micrograms/kg of bodyweight/day. Several years later, these initial limits were significantly revised by the Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Food Additives (JECFA). The revision declared provisional tolerable weekly intake (PTWI) of 15 micrograms/kg of bodyweight/week for inorganic arsenic (the harmful form of arsenic generally found in the ground). Note that this translates to arsenic intake of just 2.14 micrograms/kg of bodyweight/day. This stringent limit set forth by JECFA remains in practice even now. It should also be noted here that the minimum lethal dose of arsenic is roughly 1,000 micrograms/kg of bodyweight/day.

With the different arsenic intake limits available, we are in a position to examine whether arsenic consumption through rice is a serious threat. Let us assume that the average Bangladeshi man weighs about 60 kg and the average woman weighs about 50

kg. Then, following the most stringent arsenic intake limit set by JECFA, we have PTWI of approximately 900 micrograms (128.57 micrograms per day) and 750 micrograms (107.14 micrograms per day) of arsenic for a man and a woman respectively. If we adhere to the 1967 MADL limit, MADL is 3,000 micrograms for a man and 2,500 micrograms for a woman. The minimum lethal dose would be about 60,000 micrograms for a man and 50,000 micrograms for a woman.

It is estimated that for average Bangladeshis, about 70% of daily caloric intake comes from rice. Assuming that a woman of 50 kg weight consumes 1,500 calories and a man of 60 kg weight consumes 2,000 calories, the woman will have consumed 1,050 calories in rice and the man will have consumed 1,400 calories in rice. Since 1 gram of rice produces 4 calories, we can deduce that the woman will have consumed 262.5 grams of rice and the man will have consumed 350 grams of rice per day.

If the rice comes from paddy that has 300 micrograms of arsenic (the highest amount found by Professors Badruzzaman and Ali), then the arsenic consumption for our hypothetical 60kg Bangladeshi man is 105 micrograms and for our hypothetical 50kg Bangladeshi woman is 78.5 micrograms per day. These numbers are below even the most stringent arsenic intake limits established

by JECFA. Of course, the MADL and the lethal levels are nowhere near the arsenic consumed through rice that came from paddy registering the highest levels of arsenic in the study.

Although these levels of arsenic are below the PTWI established by JECFA, the health risks involved with considerable consumption of arsenic should not be neglected. As identified by the WHO, the symptoms associated with arsenic poisoning are abdominal pain, vomiting, and bloody "rice water" diarrhea. Also, arsenic is classified as a carcinogen and may cause cancer of the skin, lungs, kidneys, and bladder. The health risks of arsenic are greatest for children, elderly, and those whose immune systems are compromised due to disease.

In Bangladesh, arsenic intake occurs mainly through drinking arsenic-rich water. Reducing arsenic content in drinking water is an effective way to keep arsenic intake in check. Compared to the threat of arsenic-rich drinking water, the presence of arsenic in irrigation water (because it passes on to food grains) seems less threatening. Being aware of arsenic concentration in water is necessary, but a trace amount of arsenic in paddy is perhaps not as alarming.

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