

Concerns about city's receding water table

Measures such as use of surface water needed to diversify sources and avert environmental hazards like quake

FALLING water table below the capital city has reached such an alarming proportion that the prime minister the other day warned the nation in parliament saying that it is facing the threat from earthquake as its fallout.

In fact, experts, too, have been issuing warning in a similar tone since long that due to continuous withdrawal of groundwater for drinking and municipal purposes by the Dhaka Water and Sewerage Authority (DWASA), the recharging of the aquifers adequately from sources like rainwater is becoming difficult. As a consequence of this indiscriminate withdrawal of water, the natural reservoirs of water underground are becoming hollow. All these factors militate against the appropriate geohydrological balance of the city and its surrounding areas. And so long as this trend of dewatering of the city's underground continues in this manner, of the many bad consequences it poses, earthquake remains a very potential one.

The only way to save the city from such an impending catastrophe is to drastically cut the use of groundwater so that the underground aquifers may cope and recharge themselves. Reassuringly, the prime minister has also shown an alternative way to avert the looming danger through diversifying the use of water.

At this stage, it would be germane to point out that it is not just the capital city, but the whole nation is engaged in depleting the groundwater sources, especially for use in agriculture with the help of deep tube wells. So, as it is in the case of the capital city, the issue of using surface water is equally applicable for the whole population. Moreover, with the tube-wells getting contaminated with arsenic in increasing number, the case for looking for safe drinking water for the rest of the population from the existing surface water sources is also getting stronger by the day.

The government's different schemes to supply Dhaka with treated surface water from the river Padma and other sources will certainly go a long way in meeting the city's ever-growing demand for water as well as protecting it from the environmental hazards as forewarned by the prime minister. Faced with these predicaments, it is, therefore, expected that the government would widen its plans for surface water use further so that the entire nation could be protected from the hazards of drinking arsenic-poisoned water, while at the same time the groundwater tables could be protected against the dangers that their indiscriminate withdrawals pose.

Thai Princess' visit

Our condolences at the death of Thai diplomat

PRINCESS Maha Chakri Srindhorn, the second daughter of the King of Thailand, spent two days in our countryside amongst a typical rural ambience. What took her there was a child and maternal health project run by a local voluntary organisation under the aegis of the ministry of health. The project is a good example of public-private partnership.

The Thai princess was visiting Bangladesh as part of a US research team of the Bloomberg School of Public Health of John Hopkins University. However, we understand that it was also her personal interest in the rural life and culture of Bangladesh, particularly in women of remote areas, and she is involved personally with the issue in Thailand, that brought her to our country. She happens to be a special envoy of UNESCO as well.

It should be a matter of satisfaction for us that a local project dealing with child and women health project would engender the interest of an institution like the John Hopkins enough to be sponsoring it since 1999. We are sure that the purpose of the visit has been achieved and the visit will help spread the news about successful work being done in the field of child health by local organisations in this country.

Going by the reception and sendoff she was accorded by the locals of Gaibanda it is evident that Princess Maha was able to endear herself to the local people. And we are certain that she too has found the visit rewarding and have got an insight into our rural life, as also of how women at the grassroots level in Bangladesh are engaged in changing their own lot.

It needs emphasising that the two countries have similar social structure and shared social values, and very similar rural lifestyle. And we are sure that the princess' visit will help further cement the already strong ties of friendship between the two countries and forge a new era partnership in the field of economic advancement, particularly in the field of women and rural development. And here one would like to reiterate and reinforce the PM's remark during Princess' Maha's call on her that there is no alternative to joint effort for eradication of poverty.

Regrettably, the visit had a very sad note to it: the minister counselor of the Thai Embassy in Bangladesh, who was a part of the Princess' entourage, was killed in a car accident on her way back to Dhaka. We express our deepest condolences at the death of Ms. Pannee Lickanjale.

Unacceptable violence in public institutions

We have to understand that there are many national issues that need to be addressed successfully if we are going to reduce poverty, achieve food security, overcome the challenges of climate variability and remove illiteracy. It is consequently incumbent on the political leaderships of all parties to work together in being able to reach these goals.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

IT is indeed sad that student politics has deteriorated today to a point where activists of political parties feel encouraged not only to be disorderly but also to resort to murder. This has added a new dimension to the sorry scene. The stakes have grown beyond just acquiring control on teachers' recruitment, students' admission, tender manipulation, etc.

The deplorable attack is now being interpreted by some as a new phase in the ongoing efforts by Shibir in different educational institutions all over the country to re-establish their presence ahead of a possible War Crimes Trial for those associated with the genocide committed during 1971. This latest manifestation in Rajshahi has been a more formal expression of the fact that this University in recent years has turned into a citadel of reactionary politics where muscle power is being used to secure objectives. As in the case of Chittagong, this has also re-affirmed the failure of the progressive secular-democratic forces.

What is most discouraging is the brutality associated with the incident perpetrated by the armed cadre of the Islami Chatra Shibir, students' front of Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami in the Rajshahi campus. The killing of the activist of the Bangladesh Chatra League was also accompanied by random attacks on their students, some of whom suffered premeditated grievous injuries like cutting of tendons and muscle in their arms and legs.

The other serious aspect of this issue has been the open citing of claims that this University's teachers have become so politicized that their political preferences have subordinated educational impartiality and needs of students. In this context it has been interesting to read a newspaper report that there are around 1,100 teachers at Rajshahi University of whom around 325 have been classified as belonging to the progressive parties, about 300 being loyal to BNP and the rest having affiliations with the Jamaat. It has also been asserted that

the Shibir is trying to maintain its supremacy on the campus through direct and indirect threats addressed to the University authorities.

Another newspaper has noted that nearly 60 clashes have taken place among the student wings of different political parties on the RU campus since 1971. This has resulted in the deaths of 28 and injuries to more than 2,100. Such disturbances have led to the University remaining closed for more than 600 days over the past three decades.

It is disappointing that such mayhem should have occurred again between students of different political persuasions and that the law and order agencies as well as the University authorities were unable to contain it. This will certainly affect credibility and public perception about them.

We have also seen electronic footage recently of the police authorities remaining on the sidelines during the intra-party violence in the Dhaka University campus.

From that point of view it is indeed satisfying that the government, particularly the Home Ministry and other law and order agencies have started taking action against those allegedly responsible for these incidents.

The Prime Minister on more than one occasion has urged the students to refrain from violence in the campus. She has similarly directed the police force to crack down on trouble makers without fear regardless of political affiliations of the perpetrators. One can only hope that this freefall within the campus can be controlled effectively.

A stable and peaceful campus is vital for meeting educational needs. What has happened in Rajshahi has already cast long shadows in several other educational institutions. It has led to rival student bodies undertaking armed attacks in Pabna, Pirojpur, Mehendiganj and Gaibandha.

The government needs to show zero tolerance towards such violence.

I believe that time has also come for the relevant authorities to examine whether there is need to permit political activities



This is certainly unbecoming of educational campus.

within teachers and students in different public sector educational institutions.

Yes, students and teachers of the Dhaka University as well as other public educational institutions played a magnificent and responsible role in the past in the achieving of many national causes. Their participation and sacrifice directly helped during the language movement and also during the war of liberation. These were worthy causes.

However what is happening now is unacceptable. Consequently, I feel that there is need to take comprehensive measures and stern action in the public universities and other public educational institutions at all levels. What we have seen is another effort to create unnecessary unrest and instability. As with the BDR mutiny, this is one more pre-planned effort to disrupt governance.

We have to understand that there are many national issues that need to be addressed successfully if we are going to reduce poverty, achieve food security, overcome the challenges of climate variability and remove illiteracy. It is consequently incumbent on the political leaderships of all parties to work together in being able to reach these goals.

In this context, it is suggested that there should be measures to set up as a first step a specific Judicial Inquiry Commission to ascertain what led to the incident in Rajshahi and who were involved. This

would be required for the subsequent judicial process. At the same time, another Inquiry Commission needs to be established by the government, composed of one Member of Parliament from different political parties represented in the Jatiyo Sangshad, Vice Chancellors of the important public sector Universities and the Chairman of the University Grants Commission.

This Commission could be chaired by a retired Chief Justice and may be given a firm time frame within which it will determine objectively the causes for disruptive behaviour within different public sector campuses and then recommend necessary steps for meaningful solutions.

The Education Minister could later submit this Commission's report for discussion within the relevant Standing Committee of the Parliament. Subsequently, it could be placed in front of the House for its consideration and for whatever necessary steps that it might deem fit.

We have to recognize that we have a serious problem in our hands. We need to think out of the box. We have to remember that despite scanty resources, massive amounts of subsidy are provided for public sector educational opportunities. Such constructive efforts must not be allowed to go in vain.

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Politics of terrorism

New Delhi said rightly within an hour of the blast that it would not have a knee-jerk reaction and did not cancel the talks. The important lesson to learn from the Pune blast is to continue talking, whether the meeting of foreign secretaries is a success or not. There is no option to a dialogue.

KULDIP NAYAR

A couple of years ago when President Bush visited New Delhi he pointed his finger towards Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to commend that here was a person who had no Taliban in his country to torment. This was not really true even at that time. The then security advisor, M.K. Narayanan, said that he had his fingers crossed.

Yet what was true was that the terrorists came from outside and India had no sleepers' cell inside. At least, that was the impression. A bomb blast in Pune a few days ago, has confirmed that Indian sleepers' cells are very much there. They call themselves Indian Mujahideen so as to underline their separate identity, different from the ones operating in Pakistan.

I suspect that New Delhi knew about their presence even when the terrorists attacked Mumbai in November some 15 months ago. But the government considered it prudent not to mention about the Indian Mujahideen because all the guns were directed at Pakistan. Islamabad was embarrassed over the disclosure that some of the terrorists who were involved in the Bombay carnage were operators from its soil. However, Islamabad pressed New Delhi for information on the local sleepers' cells but got no reply despite reminders.

The Pune blast has made New Delhi change its earlier policy to keep the wraps over Indian participants. It has admitted that the sleepers' cells are present in every big city in the country. For some reasons, the government has no hesitation in saying that the Indian Mujahideen are behind the terrorist activity in India. There should be more information available.

My objection is against coming to certain conclusions without much evidence. New Delhi may be correct in its assessment that the Lashkar-e-Toiba is guiding the Indian Mujahideen from across the border. But it is quite possible that they have their

own leaders to instruct them from within the country. There is also the involvement of David Headley, a US national, whom India is trying to interview but Washington is not allowing it. New Delhi deflects attention from terrorism when it brings in Pakistan straightaway although it was cautious at the time of Pune blast. People get involved in anti-Pakistan rhetoric and lose perspective.

The real problem we face is the growth of terrorism on our side. It is sheer fundamentalism which is spreading. The youth is being brainwashed by the extremists. That Pakistan is drowned in terrorism is a cause of concern because it is bound to flow into India sooner than later. Had the two countries joined hands to fight against it, people on both sides would have heaved a sigh of relief. But mistrust again comes in the way. Most Indians are convinced that Pakistan is involved in it. Some Pakistan government agency can still be blamed. But it looks as if the government of India now wants concrete evidence before putting the responsibility at the door of Pakistan.

More worrisome is the Hindu Taliban, rearing their head in India. The murder of police officer Karkare, who was nearing the disclosure of the Malegaon blasts, was the doing of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad or the Bajrang Dal. Such instances may tell upon our pluralistic polity. The BJP may not be siding with the communal organizations openly. But the overall control of the RSS on these groups endangers our secular ethos.

After the Pune blast, I thought the consideration of peace and harmony would bring all parties together on one platform. Unfortunately, the BJP was the first one to politicize the blast or, for that matter, terrorism. It picked on the government for not doing enough to make people feel safe. No doubt, the government should be doing more to combat terrorism. But this does not mean that the party should withhold its cooperation with the government. The danger posed is not to the Congress party



Indian sleepers' cells are very much there at Pune.

alone, but to the people on the whole.

The BJP should have learnt the lesson from the manner in which the entire nation stood behind actor Shah Rukh Khan, a Muslim. The Shiv Sena, a Hindu outfit, had to make an ignominious retreat. And the issue, to the credit of the Indian people, was Shah Rukh Khan's criticism of the Indian Premier League for not having allowed the Pakistan cricketers to participate in the T20 games.

For the BJP to link the Pune blast with the talks between the foreign secretaries of India and Pakistan is to introduce politics again. Terrorism endangers the entire region. Talks on the subject have to have a priority. Yet there is no bar on any party to raise any other subject. But the point I want to emphasise is whenever the talks between India and Pakistan are to be held, the BJP reiterates its one-point programme: anti-Pakistan.

As coincidence has it, the terrorists struck at Pune just before the talks. During the days of the Atal Behari Vajpayee, the BJP hawks were reined in by his foresight to reach an understanding with Pakistan. After his retirement, the RSS voices its aggressiveness through the BJP. Its session at Indore shows that. The hostility towards Pakistan was open. If the talks are not a way to sort out things, then should India take to arms? They have behind them the support of a widely seen television channel which

talks about "aman" but pours venom against Pakistan. This also goes for Indian and Pakistani ex-bureaucrats who have suddenly become Track II. They are the ones who are responsible for the embittered relations between India and Pakistan.

I recall when I was traveling with then Prime Minister Vajpayee in his bus to Lahore he called me before we reached the border. He showed me an urgent message on the killing of 11 Hindus in the Jammu region. He said some people, even in his own party, would criticise him for going ahead with the visit despite the killings. Yet he completed his mission and accepted a time-bound agreement. It was obvious to him that what happened in the Jammu region was meant to derail the talks even before they were firmly on track.

The Pune blast was a similar effort. New Delhi said rightly within an hour of the blast that it would not have a knee-jerk reaction and did not cancel the talks. The important lesson to learn from the Pune blast is to continue talking, whether the meeting of foreign secretaries is a success or not. There is no option to a dialogue. America and the Soviet Union kept on talking all through the years of the cold war. Both India and Pakistan should tear a leaf from their book.

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