

HC directives on water we drink

Authentic test of quality long overdue

WITH the citizens quietly suffering intake of polluted and stinky Dhaka WASA water at great risk to their health, it remained for a human rights and environmental body called Human Rights and Peace for Bangladesh to petition before the High Court for civic justice. Consequently, the HC taking cognizance of the gravity of the public interest issue has issued a couple of directives to the government for getting water supplied in certain specified areas of the city tested by appropriate authorities. Of course, it is for DWASA to supply potable water to the city dwellers but there are certain testing authorities that are supposed to periodically check on the quality of piped water.

The government has been directed to get the water tested by the Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI) and Bangladesh Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (BCSIR) and submit a status report before the court in two weeks. Concurrently, the government is to obtain a report from the World Health Organisation (WHO) whether the water contains trichloromethane (THM), which is carcinogenic, in four weeks' time.

We welcome the initiative of the civic rights body and especially the prompt intervention of the court with specific directives for time-bound compliance. Apart from the worry over any cancer inducing element, the totality of water supply situation in Dhaka city has always been a matter of grave concern for the risks it held for the city dwellers. But like most other civic amenities, water supply has received low priority, its enormous value to life notwithstanding.

Let's not forget that not even half of the demand for water is met by DWASA. The deficit in water supply is itself a disservice which is all the more pronounced when one takes into account WASA's poor management of its existing resources. But this is due largely to lack of modernisation of both the sources of water supply and treatment of water as such. Meanwhile, the mix-up between sewer lines and water lines that take place in the monsoon in particular will have to be set right.

All of this is a policy matter of high importance beyond the ambit of WASA. While the overwhelming dependence on ground water is hollowing out the subterranean with falling water table threatening land subsidence, some of the long-coveted water-treatment plants to draw surface water have yet to graduate out of the drawing board. And, whatever little surface water is drawn from the rivers is so polluted that to treat it requires a concoction of chemicals which in turn makes water odorous. Policy makers at the highest level will have to decide on a strategy to reduce dependence on ground water and proportionately increase use of surface water including harvested rain water.

Billboard collapse in Gulshan

Wholesale review of urban business publicity needed

THE tragedy resulting from the collapse of a billboard in Gulshan on Monday raises a number of serious and pertinent questions. The incident has left two individuals dead and quite a few others injured. There have been similar incidents in the past as well and what happened after those incidents is that business went on as usual, with no one in authority worried about the need for corrective measures to be taken. Now, where the matter is strictly one of a putting up of billboards, it is clear that no specific rules are being followed and in fact the city corporation has adopted a policy that obviously does not take matters of public safety into account. Billboards are often put up at the most unlikely of places and in such a manner that they can collapse any time. Moreover, the corporation and the firms putting them up simply ignore the dangers that arise from such a cavalier attitude. No technical assessments regarding billboards and hoardings are made. What does become glaring to the eye is that crass commercialization is at work, with DCC only too happy to permit any business firm to publicise itself in any way it likes.

In light of the tragedy that has now taken place (and this is in addition to an earlier one in late February when a youth died from injuries resulting from a falling billboard), one must ask the city mayor and his administration about the degree of accountability they maintain regarding hoardings. Clearly, the first step here is for the corporation and the firm involved to compensate the families of those killed and wounded in such incidents. Additionally, those whose vehicles have been destroyed in the Gulshan incident must also be given adequate compensation. In a civilised society, no one must be allowed to get away with such callousness. As it is, over the past many years, a failure by the city corporation to delineate the frontiers between commercialism and aesthetics has led to the nation's capital rapidly taking on an ugly appearance. There are hardly any proper residential areas left any more because of the ubiquity of business establishments everywhere. The greenery which Dhaka was once famous for is now a tale of the past. And one of the worst aspects of urban life today is a blatant absence of pedestrian rights.

It is time for action. Whether the city can be reclaimed in all its past glory may be a pointless question, but there is a sure need for some action to be taken in order to give Dhaka some semblance of decency. We believe that there must be a rationalisation of policy where commercial publicity is concerned. Clear guidelines about billboards, those that cannot be flouted with impunity, must be put in place. Meanwhile, an official drive must get underway to pull down all hazardous billboards not just in Dhaka but in other places in the country as well. We do not think that on its own DCC should be making such policies. Let there be a committee to devise a clear set of policies not only about billboards but also about restoring a sense of aesthetics to Dhaka as a city. Of course, such policies must be underscored by a guarantee of public safety.

ON BANGABANDHU'S BIRTHDAY

He remembered faces, recalled names

Bangabandhu was our Druid, the high priest trudging through the woods and across villages in search of the beautiful and the sublime. In the hallowed councils of the world, he was a colossus striding across the moments that constituted the embroidered fabric of history.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

YOU could keep talking about Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. And you would do that because of the fundamental human qualities that defined his being. He inhabits our consciousness in all his largeness of form and substance, and not just in the figurative sense. Tall for a Bengali, he gave us all to understand that in him subsisted all those traits which underline the making of a political giant. His height mattered. So did his convictions. He was larger than life, in every sense of the meaning.

Think about it, think about all the other significant political figures who in the course of our modern history influenced our evolution into where we happen to be today. Bangabandhu falls within that category. And yet he breaks free of all those earlier stars and forms, within and by himself, a world apart. Of all the historical icons we have had cause to observe in our political ambience, only Bangabandhu stayed steadfast in purpose. That element you call compromise, or a shifting of the ground, was not part of his nature.

And that made all the difference. It was made clear to Bangabandhu towards the end of the 1950s that Bengal needed to make their way out of Pakistan. And remember that he came of a generation which, in the 1940s, went all the way into making sure that the Lahore Resolution of 1940 was implemented in the interest of the Muslims of India. That Sheikh Mujibur Rahman could break out of the communal mould, that he was beginning to question the very basis of the country in whose creation he, like millions of other young

men, had once taken immense interest was an early hint of the greatness he was destined for.

The path to that greatness was clearly laid out in 1966 when he overrode every other concern to inform the ruling classes of Pakistan as well as his people that it was time to reinvent the state through his Six Point program for regional autonomy. There were the grumblers; there were those who saw in the plan a shrewd way of undermining the Muslim state. Men like Nawabzada Nasrullah Khan walked away, in protest, with a big chunk of the Awami League, hoping that Mujib's faction of the party would simply fizzle out. In the event, it was the Nawabzada who was left with nothing. The Awami League became identified with Mujib.

Bangabandhu was a man of huge self-esteem and an abundance of confidence. At the height of the Agartala conspiracy trial in 1968, he coolly told a western journalist that the Pakistani authorities would not be able to keep him incarcerated for more than six months. Note that he was on trial for sedition, possibly headed toward execution or a very long term in prison. In the event, he was free in seven months. As he prepared to fly to Rawalpindi in February 1969 to attend the round table conference called by President Ayub Khan, he quipped: "Yesterday a traitor, today a hero." In Rawalpindi, he spurned Ayub's offer of the prime ministership of Pakistan.

Always a man who went by the norms of political transparency, he emphatically told Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in January 1971 that the December 1970 elections had given his party the right to govern Pakistan. The People's Party had its place marked out; it



The Leader.

was to be on the opposition benches. Bangabandhu's principled stand in national politics was matched by his diplomatic convictions abroad. He took Saudi Arabia's King Faisal to task over the latter's negative remarks on Pakistan's break-up in 1971. He put Yakubu Gowon in his place when the Nigerian lamented the weakening of Muslim Pakistan through the rise of a secular Bangladesh. He asked Indira Gandhi, in blunt fashion, when she planned to take her soldiers back home from Bangladesh.

Bangabandhu was our own. The mores and social norms we have grown up with were all exemplified in him. His smile radiated confidence and instilled courage in us. His sense of humour remains unmatched. He never forgot a face and always remembered names. His laughter reverberated across the room and beyond. He was always filling the room with his presence. When he met complete strang-

ers, he made them feel they had known him all their life. When he found himself in the company of academics, he did not forget that these were men who deserved his unqualified respect. Alone among the great men we have known, he drew respect from the intellectual classes and the more humble of citizens alike. Across this land men of letters speak of Bangabandhu with reverence. Peasants and rickshaw pullers have always known him as their very own "Mojibor" or as their unforgettable "Sheikh."

Bangabandhu was our Druid, the high priest trudging through the woods and across villages in search of the beautiful and the sublime. In the hallowed councils of the world, he was a colossus striding across the moments that constituted the embroidered fabric of history.

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Israel's threats come from its policies

Bingo! That is exactly what Israel is doing with its nuclear bomb; putting pressure on its neighbours to refrain from doing things, or objecting to things that are unacceptable to Israel! To put it bluntly, Israel is the only nuclear bully in the neighbourhood now.

FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

IT is astonishing how Israel takes America for granted! Last week, as Vice-President Joe Biden was visiting Israel to jump-start the so-called "peace process," which in reality is a code phrase for all process and no peace, the Israeli interior minister blindsided him by announcing the construction of 1,600 new houses on Palestinian lands in East Jerusalem.

To their credit, President Obama and Vice-President Biden "condemned the (Israeli) decision." (Amnesty International, which was very quick to condemn the illegal land grab by Bengali settlers in CHT, is yet to condemn Israel's latest illegal land grab in East Jerusalem.)

Such condemnation loses its bite when the US administration prefaces its criticism of Israel, as always, by reiterating its "special and strategic relationship" with Israel. That "special and strategic relationship" is solely to Israel's benefit, and direly detrimental to America's.

Slowly, the world is coming to the con-

clusion that the Israeli intransigence is a direct result of America's unquestioning backing of all Israeli actions. This unquestioning support for Israel's illegal actions puts America's interests, its soldiers and citizens at risk all over the world. It's time America focused on its own interests.

The US will continue to look foolish if on one hand it says that its bond with Israel is "unshakable" and that there is no "daylight" between Israeli and American positions, and on the other expresses surprise when Israel does something to embarrass America.

Israel makes no apology for its power in America to shape American foreign policy to Israel's advantage. Israel knows full well that in spite of America's periodic protestations of Israeli intransigence, at crunch time the Jewish lobby in America will make sure that America backs Israel to the hilt.

Israel certainly has President Obama's ears. Obama's Chief of Staff, Rahm Emanuel, is not only a staunch supporter of Israel; he actually fought for Israel, instead of America, in Gulf War II. Obama's White House Directorate of National Economic

Council is headed by Larry Summers who, as Harvard's first Jewish president, made news by criticising US universities that were divesting from companies doing business with Israel. And President Obama's Senior Advisor, David Axelrod, also Jewish, is Rahm Emanuel's closest friend. This is not to suggest that any of these three distinguished Jewish American gentlemen sway President Obama's opinion either way, but, given their history, they have the opportunity and access to do so.

Israel's policy is clear. Through settlement building, it wants to annex the whole of the West Bank. When the "peace process," which is better labeled as the "annexation process," began in 1993 Israel had 196,000 Jewish settlers in the West Bank. Today, it has more than double (400,000). Two of the settlements are towns with over 30,000 residents. That is why the "process" suits Israel so well. They can build settlements, and carry on the creeping annexation, while the US and the West divert the world's attention with talks of "road maps," and a nonexistent "peace process."

At the same time, Israel insists that it will remain a Jewish state; a sentiment the US resoundingly echoes. So, what is to happen to the Palestinians who are trapped inside Israel's annexation lines? Well, they will have to be disenfranchised. Because, if the Palestinians are allowed to vote, with their faster birth rate, they will outnumber the Jews in Palestine fairly soon.

Therefore, to counter Palestinians'

demographic advantage, Israel will have to institute apartheid. If things proceed the way they are, the world will witness its second apartheid regime in Israel! And America will take brunt of the blame and suffer the consequences.

So, with everything in its favour, why is Israel worried about Iran? Sometimes even a gifted politician can have a faux pas moment, which is literally "the moment of truth." In an interview with Chris Matthews of MSNBC television talk show, "Hardball," in Jerusalem last week, Vice-President Joe Biden explained why a nuclear Iran is unacceptable: "When you have a nuclear weapon, it allows -- the thought is that it allows -- a lot of pressure to be placed upon neighbouring countries to refrain from objecting to things that are unacceptable, actually unacceptable conduct. And so, whether or not it would be used or not used, the one thing it would be, would put a great deal of pressure on those very countries we're talking about to acquire a nuclear capability themselves."

Bingo! That is exactly what Israel is doing with its nuclear bomb; putting pressure on its neighbours to refrain from doing things, or objecting to things that are unacceptable to Israel! To put it bluntly, Israel is the only nuclear bully in the neighbourhood now. Because of the bomb, Israel can control the behaviour of its neighbours. If Iran were to acquire the bomb, that monopoly will be lost forever.

If in the wake of an Iranian (Shia) bomb, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Egypt were to say that they, too, must have the (Sunni) bomb, Israel's power would be completely neutralised. In that case, immigration of Jews to Israel will stop, and emigration of Jews from Israel will begin, which will lead to the destruction of the Jewish state!

Some version of the above scenario will play out someday. Israel is counting on the Arabs and Muslims remaining dumb, disunited and powerless forever. That may not be a realistic expectation. Israel had a wonderful opportunity to make peace with the Palestinians beginning in 1993. The Arabs and the Muslim world were ready to accept a Jewish Israel alongside a Palestinian state. But the Jewish right would have none of it.

Jewish zealot Yagil Amir murdered the architect of the Oslo Accord, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, on November 4, 1995. A few months later, Israeli voters voted Rabin's Labour party out of power, and replaced it with the hard line Likud Party with Benjamin Netanyahu as the prime minister.

Netanyahu began dismantling the Oslo Accord right away, and is back in power now. He has never been interested in making peace with the Palestinians. He and his party want the whole pie.



The bully in the Middle East.

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