

Dhaka's severe water problem

Why no sign of action as yet?

At a time when we observed the World Water Day, ironically a large section of the city dwellers has been undergoing tremendous suffering due to lack of water. Everyday greater number of people of the city is being affected by shortage of potable water. And it seems that Dhaka WASA is capable of doing very little to end the misery. The situation has been worsened by the hot and murky weather.

We would suggest the government go public on the matter immediately. People must be informed about the actual state of the problem, and why that is defying resolution. For all we know, 13 percent of the water supply in the city is drawn from surface water i.e. river water while the remainder 87 percent is pumped out ground water piped through a network. An investigative study shows that the treated river water gets mixed up with deep tubewell water; that is where the crux of the problem of pollution lies.

Besides, the purification capacity of the treatment plants having to do with 13percent of surface water cannot cope with the sheer level of contamination in the river water. The government should analyse the situation and come up with what it intends to do to ensure supply of safe water to the citizens and within what time period.

We cannot reiterate more strongly the parliamentary standing committee's advice to WASA officials that they stop resorting to rhetoric and proffering excuses and, instead, deliver to the people the much needed water and thus deliver them from the suffering. We are concerned that WASA will not be able to do anything before the month of May, according to a highly placed WASA official.

As medium to long term plan is under taken to resolve the water crisis on a durable basis, immediate investment in capacity building for WASA is called for insofar as obtaining an adequate fleet of transport is concerned to be able to reach water through tanker lorries to the water-starved segments of the capital city.

The acute scarcities have been a seasonal annual issue for a long time. To top it off, this has continued to exacerbate serving sufficient notice on all concerned for bracing up to it with some contingency planning. How long are we to be caught napping without a level of preparedness in place to mitigate the seasonal suffering.

OMS in Khulna

Give it to genuine traders

Report published in this newspaper yesterday says that 25 out of 31 dealers appointed for open market sale of rice in Khulna city belong to the ruling party. The point is relevant, because genuine rice traders have been overlooked as political connection seems to have been the criterion for appointing the dealers.

Selling rice under the OMS is a well-intentioned programme that aims to help the low-income group. However, it can be effective only when experienced and honest dealers are appointed to sell rice or any other commodity allotted by the government for OMS. So, appointment of professional dealers would have added to the credibility of the government alongside enhancing the efficiency of the programme itself. It has been further reported that some of the dealers do not even own shops in the city. However, the most serious allegation against some dealers is that they might not be selling the whole lot of rice that was delivered to them. Locals have complained that in some cases sale of rice is stopped just after one hour of its beginning in the morning. While the dealers have dismissed such complaints as baseless, it seems the process lacks transparency and supervision and therefore must be gone into and the public assured of corrective measures.

The regional controller of food of Khulna would do well to report to the government and help dispel the suspicions creeping in regarding the activities of the dealers by ensuring that rice is sold as per the agreement reached between the dealers and the food department.

It is clearly not enough to identify an area where an OMS programme may help the people to get a commodity at a much cheaper price. Equally important is the task of giving such programmes a neutral and transparent character free from any political bias. Open market sale of rice is essentially designed to bring relief to people in general and it must not degenerate into a business with profiteering as its sole motive. The Khulna case should alert the decision makers to the possibility of a welfare-oriented venture being exploited by elements having political connections. It can only set a bad example and cause more harm than good by derailing OMS.

Dhaka must not be a loser

The ignominious ranking of the city is not an aspersion on the city alone, it indicates how badly we are affected while living in this city. It is for the sake of our very existence that we have to forge together the unity to save the city from such ignominy. Dhaka cannot be a loser in perpetuity.

SAADAT HUSAIN

DHAKA is my city; my love. Nearly fifty years back I came to this city as a young boy and lived here since then. I grew with the expanding Dhaka and vice versa. As students we found it reasonably clean and livable with a touch of intimacy almost everywhere. It had a vibrant cultural life. Streets were safe. Life and property were safe by any city standard. The population was manageable; there was no traffic jam, no stampeding on the footpath. Encroachment on roads, canals or rivers was negligible. There were fields, commons and sprawling space.

It pains me immensely to see that my city over the last three to four decades has degenerated into the second worst livable city in the world. The poll had been taken by a reputed organisation and is based on a sound methodology and acceptable indicators. Bangladeshi researchers or analysts did not raise any objection to the findings. The tragedy is that it is all happening before our eyes and we have been mute observers. We did not try to resist the slide through conscious and concerted effort. We did not really realise the long term implications of the activities and encroachments that were going on all around us.

Both the city and its population started expanding since the mid-seventies. The pell-mell expansion defied all civic considerations. It catered to the rapacity of special interest groups, much to the disadvantage of the common citizens. Greens were destroyed, commons were occupied, lakes and canals filled up to build concrete or bamboo structures, footpaths were sold to vendors and public spots leased to goons.

Hijackers, gangsters, extortionists started ruling selected areas with the patronage of law enforcers, power brokers and people in high places. Soft pedaling, brain-dead partisanship, confrontational political culture, coterie interest and lure for lucre undermined the very concept of

management and public administration. Quality of life was gradually brought to the brink. Citizen groups never made any effort to arrest or reverse the slide.

The main factors behind this catastrophic state are population explosion and absence of management efforts of any sort. We did not take the expansion and management of the city seriously; we took it in a cavalier fashion. The filling of ditches and water bodies here and there, the stream of uprooted people trekking into the city, the soaring number of buses arriving straight from the upazilas, innumerable market places both structured and improvised springing up in almost every block and the imposing condos constructed on the commons and playgrounds all escaped the attention of our city planners, regulators, city managers, development authorities. Maybe some of them were accomplices in the process. We were sensitised at a very late stage; the damage has already been done, it is now very difficult to control it.

No situation is totally beyond repair. It is impossible to make Dhaka an exquisitely beautiful and livable city in a short span of time. It is, however, possible to improve the situation in a long-term framework through a determined effort by people who matter and the citizens who live in the city. A battle is lost not because of an unexpected setback in the field but because of the lack of willingness to fight back. We must not lose heart, sit idle and blame each other; instead we have to first critically review the situation compos mentis.

The problems have to be identified seriatim: unending stream of population, traffic jam creating deadlock on the road, encroachment on roads and foot paths, illegal constructions on public places, load shedding, scarcity of running water, grabbing of fields and commons, destruction of water bodies, crimes on roads and in markets and public places and inadequacy of



Can Dhaka regain its past beauty?

public transport system -- particularly hired taxi service.

Once this is done we have to list our weaknesses in addressing the problems. I can divine that problems will be technological, financial, legal, political and managerial. A concerted effort will be necessary on all the fronts to make a dent in the situation.

A big problem is organisational. The pace of growth has been too fast for the organisations pertinent to good living in the city. Many of these organisations have become anachronistic and dysfunctional in some cases. They do not have necessary manpower, legal backing and logistic support to accomplish the tasks assigned to them. I had interactions with some of these organisations. I was astounded to see that most of them were too inadequate to match the problems they are supposed to resolve. It will be a gigantic task to revamp these organisations to the point of being effective.

Only a determined and concerted effort from all relevant quarters, led by the gov-

ernment, may be of some help in this respect. Unless the organisations are placed on a robust footing with the capability to ensure micro-level enforcement backed by a stolid macro framework, it will not be possible to make any headway towards discernible improvement.

Dhaka is our city, our love. We cannot let it down. The city also should not let us down. There is an umbilical dependence between the two. We have debased the city, saving it is now a deontological compulsion for all of us. Citizens have to take the initiative. The government's support will follow if the citizen's movement gathers momentum.

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Dr. Saadat Husain is Chairman, Public Service Commission

The oil curse

Such are the complications of the oil curse. You can take the petroleum out of the ground like the genie out of a bottle, but you can't be sure where it will take you. Aladdin would have understood.



CHRISTOPHER DICKEY

LIKE one of those perverse twists in the tales of "The Arabian Nights" (many of which, you will recall, took place in Baghdad and Basra), modern Iraq's greatest source of prosperity -- its vast reserves of oil and natural gas -- could also be the biggest long-term threat to hopes for democracy.

Yes, on Sunday the Iraqis once again proved bravely, stubbornly, even astoundingly, that they won't be kept away from the polls by mere car bombs and mortar shells. But, by and large, they were voting for the same coterie of politicians who've made Iraq among the five most corrupt nations in the world. The country's near-term future is just about waiting, after the election, for a new government to take shape over the next many weeks.

But its long-term future could be haunted by what Stanford professor Larry Diamond calls "the oil curse."

How much oil are we talking about? Even after years of embargo, occupation, and civil war that weakened its production

capacity, Iraq was the third-biggest producer in Opec in January, according to the trade journal *Petroleum Economist*.

The 2.45 million barrels it pumped every day would have brought in roughly \$172 million -- every day. In another three or four years, now that development contracts have been agreed with several major Western oil companies, that production could double, racking up income on the order of \$125 billion a year. And that doesn't even begin to calculate the billions in revenue from largely untapped natural gas deposits.

"Not a single one of the 23 countries that derive most of their export earnings from oil and gas is a democracy today," Diamond notes. Especially in Arab countries, the fabulous riches that come from under the ground tend to create overbearing governments with apathetic citizens. "In these systems, the state is large, centralised, and repressive," Diamond wrote. Societies are usually "intensely policed" because "there is plenty of money to lavish on a huge and active state-security apparatus," and bureaucracies are "profoundly

corrupt." They tend to see the money that pours into state coffers as everybody's and nobody's, and therefore, more or less free for the taking. The public pays no taxes in the richer states, and, in the view of the entrenched potentates, no taxation means no need for representation.

Precisely because the Iraqi government

talk more about the need for federalism and decentralisation than they do about the relative abstraction of "democracy." If they are going to get the basic public services and the jobs they desperately need -- the issues that dominated Sunday's elections -- the oil money has to be spread around.

And Husari says there are positive signs that may be happening. Iraq's 2010 budget law has provisions for a portion of the income from each barrel produced in a given province or "governorate" to be paid back to it. There may be no comprehensive "hydrocarbon law" yet, but the article in the budget "is going to happen," says Husari. "The governorates are going to come at the end of the year and say, 'Where is our money?'"

Even if Iraq's rising oil and gas production does help to buy internal peace, however, it will pose an economic -- indeed, a strategic -- challenge to its most troubled and troublesome neighbour; Iran.

The government in Tehran is already having serious economic problems, and because embargos and boycotts have cut it off from a lot of Western oil technology, it has a very hard time raising its production of about 3.7 million barrels a day to compensate when prices fall. It wants to make sure that Iraq, which has been exempted from all Opec quotas, will not start out-producing it, driving down prices and further crippling the Iranian economy.

Already, skirmishing has begun behind the scenes at the oil cartel as Tehran tries to make sure quotas are imposed on Iraq before it can surpass Iran and perhaps even start to rival Saudi Arabia (which produces a whopping 8.2 million barrels daily and could go higher).

The more the higher. Letting competitive pressure from Iraq, the more likely they are to meddle in its internal affairs, whether with violence or, more subtly, through a democratic process where they try to control key players from behind the scenes.

Getting to Iran's level of oil production in the next three years "will not be a big issue for Iraq," says Husari. "Whether Iran will accept it -- that's the big question."

Such are the complications of the oil curse. You can take the petroleum out of the ground like the genie out of a bottle, but you can't be sure where it will take you. Aladdin would have understood.

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