

## Ridding the city of lethal billboards

*An action that has been long overdue*

WHILE welcoming the High Court directive in response to a writ filed by a human rights and peace body to remove all unauthorised billboards in the capital city one can quite see it's just the beginning of a process that is being marked. It can't be a one-off step but has to be regarded as part of a process that must be completed if the intervention is to be comprehensively effective and meaningful.

With the DCC and the police being directed to work in tandem to carry out the clean-up act, we also need to take into account the roof-top hoardings carrying stay orders since 2007 which await an expeditious disposal to complete the cycle of attempted redress.

The whole city landscape and skyline are sorely filled with a dense concentration of billboards and hoardings as a shameful marker of crass commercialism. It is totally unmindful of aesthetics and minimal safety consideration for pedestrians or vehicle users.

The roof-top hoardings on high-rise buildings raise a fundamental concern over the texture and strength of the perpendicular or cylindrical structures themselves and particularly those of the pillars they stand on. These are engineering nightmares enacted almost overnight without any authoritative supervision with whatever material could be put together having no regard to whether these could withstand wind velocity in different weather conditions, especially in gales. Even the pillars are pitched in parts of the pavement. Under whose authority such an impingement occurred on the pavement blocking the view of the road users, apart from school boys or girls risking dangerously tripping over, nobody knows!

The motorists, bus riders, motorcyclists and pedestrians alike are held hostage to the ubiquitous billboards and edging out advertisement placards. It is impossible to see any tree, any greenery, it's all a passage, as though, through a tunnel with sides of ugly dimensions.

All said and done, it is a form of business to put up advertisement and earn revenue from it. If there is a code of conduct for newspaper and television advertisers and advertisements, it is all the more necessary that we have a book of rules for billboards and hoarding stipulating do's and don'ts for the space giver and user in view of the mounting evidence of lawlessness engulfing the sordid business of billboards manifest at every busy traffic intersection of the city.

## Police action against Drik exhibition

*It undercuts people's political and cultural rights*

THE police action, stopping the Drik gallery exhibition of images relating to the incidents of 'crossfire' in Bangladesh, is a case of oppression and curtailment of our fundamental rights of freedom of expression, speech, information and cultural expression. On Monday, just before the exhibition was to be inaugurated by eminent Indian intellectual Mahasweta Devi, policemen positioned themselves before the gallery in Dhanmondi and simply refused to let anyone enter or come out of its premises. By way of explanation, they told the media that Drik gallery did not have permission to organise the exhibition.

The question of permission is totally uncalled for. There are hundreds of photo exhibitions and other such functions of public viewing happening everyday in the capital city. Did their organisers have to seek permission in each case to be holding these? Drik itself has been organising such events since 1993. Never was any permission required or sought or demanded by any agency. Exhibitions such as these have educative, informational and instructive values. Free flow of ideas helps enrich intellectual wealth of the country, broadens its outlook and enhances the level of tolerance in a society of contrary or dissenting views. There may be a debate on an issue but it doesn't mean people on one side of an issue need not hear or refuse to see the other's point of view.

This is exactly the level of maturity we crave for and have actually reached in certain areas of national life which must not be allowed to be undone through any ham-handed act of indiscretion. If the police become the arbiter of what is right and what is wrong for our society, then God help us.

Let certain facts be made clear. Democracy entails a guarantee and preservation of the political and cultural rights of citizens. In such a setting, the sensitivities of certain individuals or groups or bodies cannot override the bigger demands of an open, liberal society which the present government espouses as policy. Now, if the police or any other agency is upset at a revelation of the sordid truth that 'crossfires' have been, they should be making sure that such extra-judicial killings do not recur. The fault lies not with Drik gallery that it organised the exhibition. It lies in the inability or reluctance of the authorities to dig into the question of why 'crossfire' killings are today a reprehensible affair. Besides, why must the authorities forget that by preventing what they think is adverse publicity for the country they are only making it more pronounced before the nation and the outside world?

We condemn the police action. And we would like the home minister to explain to citizens how such acts that clearly militate against the people's right to know and observe and interpret conditions can at all take place.

## Of the mediocre and the maddening

Mediocrity coming in tandem with the maddening is the reigning truth for men who have always turned morality on its head. Listen carefully. You will hear the shrill cries of decadent men baying for the blood of the Ahmadiyyas of this land.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THESE are unimaginable things happening in the country. A pretty senior journalist has just warned the nation's prime minister that if she so much as attempts a removal of the grave of General Ziaur Rahman from its present site, she will find her hands broken. That leaves you not only surprised but shocked as well, for you and I have grown up on values which teach us to respect the individual. And what is happening here is that not only is there no respect but that there is also a clear hurling of a threat at the head of government. Your sense of outrage tells you that such men are dangerous, that they should be brought to heel in the greater public interest. And note that the threat was accompanied by the nonsensical.

This journalist has also advised Sheikh Hasina that every time she goes home past Zia's grave to Ganobhaban, she should make sure that she salutes that resting place -- in honour of a man he thinks restored multi-party democracy in Bangladesh. Ah, but this newsman conceals a good deal of the truth here, which is that in the guise of a restoration of a democracy, the late dictator made sure that all the noble principles underpinning the War of Liberation were cast aside in order for the enemies of freedom to return to the political centre stage. The old Pakistan-obsessed Muslim Leaguers and Jamaatis, who should have gone to prison or worse for treason, a la Nuremberg, came back to re-paint themselves as men who mattered in Bangladesh. And you call that a return to multi-party democracy?

These are bizarre times we live through. There is something queer happening to men we once thought were individuals of good intent if not actual intellect. They keep telling us that someday the elder son of the leader of the opposition will return home in glory, to preside over a golden age in this country. No, we will not remind the nation of the notoriety this young man and many others like him succeeded in achieving in the recent past. And we will not

because it is a tale no one has forgotten, or should forget.

Much of the misery we go through today, much of the trauma we went through in the years when the four-party alliance lorded it over us, has to do with the general state of misrule and an absolute absence of the dignity of the individual in those sinister times. Paupers rose to being millionaires overnight; men with no idea of journalism ended up being owners of media empires; lawmakers made off with provisions from the parliament canteen; ministers gave away prime land to organisations founded by their spouses; citizens found themselves hauled away to prison because the ruling classes thought they were all opposition activists out to destabilise the government; noted academics and suave politicians were taken on remand on charges of criminality patently false; evidence at the scenes of explosions was swiftly wiped off and innocent men were netted as scapegoats to cover the misdeeds of powerful men.

That being the truth, it gets to be sheer disbelief when votaries of the old regime tell us, without batting an eyelid, that the elder child of the former prime minister will one day come back home as a Nelson Mandela. Hilarity gets the better of you, almost choking you with its intensity. Mandela? There is something faulty about these men's reading of history here. That has been a problem with these people. They have always got their history wrong. Be it a comprehension of Bangladesh's political legacy, be it an understanding of the wider world out there, these men and women who would like to break the hands of the prime minister have always ended up singing praises of the wrong men and defending causes that have never been there in the first place.

Move on, for such queer behaviour is beginning to come in packs for you. If that young man is being placed on a pedestal with Mandela, the adherents of the Jamaate-Islami would like you to know they are not far behind. Their leader, they say, is on a par with the Prophet of Islam. Of course, that is sheer nonsense. And by God it is



JIM EDMON

blasphemy of the highest order! These men without shame now tell you that just as his enemies made it hard for the Prophet to disseminate the message of Islam across Arabia, the Bengalis today asking for a trial of the war criminals of 1971 are preventing Motiur Rahman Nizami from propagating Islam's teachings in this beautiful country.

Someone ought to remind these self-appointed purveyors of faith that there is no record of the Prophet of Islam having initiated or supported genocide. There is more: neither the Prophet nor his noble

disciples unleashed outfits called al-Badr and al-Shams into the business of kidnapping good men and women and then bayoneting them to death on forlorn brick fields.

Mediocrity coming in tandem with the maddening is the reigning truth for men who have always turned morality on its head. Listen carefully. You will hear the shrill cries of decadent men baying for the blood of the Ahmadiyyas of this land.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star. E-mail: bahsantareq@yahoo.co.uk.

## A step in the right direction

The need for a satisfactory food stock in the government godowns can hardly be over-emphasised. The government has to do this through procurement of domestically produced food grains as well as through imports, when necessary.



M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

THE government has decided to import rice to meet the domestic demand. In its meeting on March 7, the cabinet committee on purchase approved the food ministry's proposal to select the Singapore-based Indo-Sino Trade Private to supply 25,000 tonnes of un-boiled rice from Myanmar in April. Food Minister Abdur Razzaque told reporters after the purchase committee meeting that more rice would be imported later on.

Now, the question may arise as to why the government went for importing rice when the harvesting of the major rice crop, boro, was one month and a half or so away, and contradicted its not too long distant thinking of exporting rice.

First, food availability is considered as the first component of food security, the other two being access to food and utilisation of food. Again, satisfactory food grain stock in the government godowns is one of

the sub-components of food availability. The government food grain stock is primarily built up through internal procurement of aman and boro rice. This season's aman procurement program began on December 7 and was scheduled to end on February 28.

The food and disaster management ministry's (MOFDM) Fortnightly Foodgrain Outlook dated March 4 reveals that as of February 25, the government could procure only 9.1 thousand tonnes of aman rice against the procurement target for 300 thousand tonnes. The program almost totally failed primarily due to higher price of rice in the open market compared to the government administered procurement price of Tk. 22 per kilogram.

Second, because of the failure to procure targeted aman rice, and disbursement of food grains (rice and wheat) for government financed food programs such as food for work, test relief, gratuitous relief as well as for open-market operations to help stabilise rice prices, the government

security stock of food grains has come down to below 1 million tonnes, which, according to a decision of the immediate past AL government, is the minimum food grain stock to be maintained in the government godowns at all times. The need to replenish the security food stock has made it obligatory for the government to go for importing rice even before the harvesting of the coming boro crop.

Third, the production targets for aus, aman and boro rice in 2009-10 have been fixed at 2.49 million tonnes, 12.74 million tonnes and 19.0 million tonnes respectively. The BBS has finalised aus rice production at 1.71 million tonnes, which is 0.78 million tonnes less than the target. Although the agriculture ministry has claimed attainment of aman rice production target, this is yet to be confirmed by the BBS. This year's boro production target is 1.19 million tonnes more than the last year's actual production (19.0 million tonnes -- 17.81 million tonnes) against 2.5 million or so new mouths.

Boro is primarily an irrigation-based crop. Recent newspaper reports suggest that the acute power crisis is seriously hampering irrigation of boro crop during the peak season. The Daily Star of March 21 published an alarming report, which said that farmers were feeding dying boro plants to cattle at Mirzapur under Tangail district as lack of irrigation due to power crisis caused premature death of the plants.

Groundwater is the main source of irrigation. Over-extraction of groundwater for irrigation of boro crop has led to the depletion of groundwater level in many places of the country, and extraction of groundwater by using irrigation pumps has not been fruitful in those places. Uncertainty in achieving boro production target has also influenced the government to go for importing rice.

Fourth, the June, 2009 issue of Food Outlook, a biannual publication of FAO, forecasted a modest growth in rice production in Asia in 2009-10 after two years of fast growth, and hinted that a few countries, including Bangladesh, might experience a contraction in rice production. The December, 2009 issue says that the global paddy production outlook had worsened substantially since the release of the June issue, and stands at 675 million tonnes, 13 million tonnes or 1.9 percent less than 2008. There is concern about a possible return to another round of high prices. This

has given a signal to the government to go for importing rice to augment its food grain stock position.

Fifth, we had a bumper boro crop last year. As a result, soaring price of rice came down significantly in the first eight or nine months of 2009. But the prices of different varieties of rice have been on the rise since October of the current fiscal year. According to the BBS, the country's food inflation crossed double-digit mark (10.56 percent) in January this year, which was 9.50 percent in December last. The country's overall inflation increased by 0.48 percentage points reaching 8.99 percent in January this year, which was 8.51 percent in December last.

Since the rising price of rice has made the lives of the low and middle-income groups miserable, the government has to intervene in the market operations through open market sale of rice countrywide. This needs a satisfactory food security stock to be built up by internal procurement and imports.

Sixth, food aid, a sub-component of food availability, has dried up in recent times. As a result of failure to procure aman rice from the domestic production, the government has no other way but to go for importing rice at the moment.

Last but not the least, the AL-led government seems to be well aware of the situation of 2008, when the then government faced difficulty in importing rice due to restrictions imposed by most of the rice exporting countries, which resulted from the worldwide shortage of food grains and their very high prices in the international markets.

The government has rightly decided to increase the government food grain storage capacity to 2 million tonnes or so from the existing 1.5 million tonnes. A satisfactory food security stock helps stabilise the market by discouraging the hoarders to hoard food grains for a long time.

In view of what has been stated above, the need for a satisfactory food stock in the government godowns can hardly be over-emphasised. The government has to do this through procurement of domestically produced food grains as well as through imports, when necessary. The private sector food importers have also to play an important role to ease the food situation in the country.

M. Abdul Latif Mondal is a former Secretary. E-mail: latifm43@gmail.com.