

Delay in repairing Aila-affected embankments *It's proving costly, make amends as quickly as possible*

THE prime minister's displeasure over the delay in the repair of embankments damaged by cyclone Aila ten months after the disaster is surely understandable. With all the time that has gone by and with the monsoon season approaching, it is only natural to ask, on the part of the head of government as indeed of any citizen, why a matter that ought to have been handled on a priority basis should have been tackled in such laid-back fashion. The officials entrusted with the responsibility of overseeing the repair of the flood protection embankments in the Aila-affected regions would have everyone know that the delay was caused by their 'scrupulous' compliance with the provisions of the Public Procurement Regulations (PPR). That logic holds little water, for the reality is that the PPR was relaxed for the very reason of facilitating the rebuilding and repair of the embankments. It is extremely unfortunate that now all sorts of excuses are being put up to explain a failure which can only prolong and worsen the miseries of those affected by the cyclone.

The plain fact of the embankment story is that about 60 per cent of the breaches had been repaired. That would sound like a success story to some. The reality, though, is that unless all embankments are repaired in totality, there is hardly any point in suggesting that everything is working out fine. Moreover, of late quite a few new breaches have developed along the embankments. That can only mean a further aggravation of conditions. And with the rains on the way, it is now the lives of the affected families that are now in a bad spot. Of course, the authorities have been providing all Aila-affected families with rice and other necessities. But as long as they do not have the roofs over their heads restored, we cannot be certain that the situation has gone back to normal.

It is clear that that the very bureaucratic approach which should have been avoided over such a sensitive issue has now endangered the future of those who have been waiting for a solution to their problems. The officials now coming up with explanations behind the delay in completing the embankment repair work should have foreseen the problems earlier and gone to work accordingly. Ten months is a long time to build or repair embankments. If that is the pace of work on such an urgent matter of public concern, one can only imagine the length of time that will possibly go into handling subjects of greater import.

It appears that the possibility of the embankments being repaired before the onset of the monsoon is rather bleak with full moon and high tide in prospect. That is a depressing thought. Even so, now that the prime minister has expressed herself on the subject, we expect the authorities to redouble their efforts toward making it possible for Aila victims to resume their lives in full protection from nature's fury.

Meanwhile, focus must be placed on finding alternative living arrangements for those whose homes are yet to be rebuilt. For thousands of people to live under the open sky and for the concerned authorities to take the issue lightly any more would be a shame.

First-ever rating of the economy

The positive ranking should be put to optimal use

BANGLADESH'S potential as a reliable destination for putting in money and investing by international creditors and investors has been positively rated by the US-based credit rating agency Standard and Poor's (S&P).

As the agency that has done the rating is a prestigious institution of global standing, it can be said that its evaluation has put Bangladesh in a fresh light among the international business community. The good news is in the South Asian context, Bangladesh's scorecard with a 'BB- for a long term' is placed above Sri Lanka and Pakistan, though below India. On any account, this is no mean achievement so far as the rating reflects our economic status and prospect in spite of the constraints on its infrastructure and energy fronts.

Now, how does Bangladesh stand to gain from such rating by an international agency?

For one thing, this first-ever rating of the country would certainly help dispel any misgiving that the international investors and creditors might have had about the country's real potential as a business partner and an investment destination. Rather than depending on hearsay and guessing, they would now be able to take their decisions on the updates available from the S&P's data. For the other, Bangladesh itself will now know its actual position vis-à-vis other economies, be able to concentrate more on addressing the weak spots in its economic profile and chart out an appropriate course of action to improve its status in its dealings with international partners.

Though it has termed the economy's 'outlook' as 'stable', the rating agency, however, has not failed to point to the fiscal constraints, the low-income status and the huge development needs that are still burdening the economy. So, according to its prognostications, the durability of such 'outlook' depends on how prudently macro-economic policy is framed and maintained and the micro-economic reforms done to address the growth constraints.

As expected, the business community, especially the bankers, has been enthused by the positive rating of the economy. According to their view Bangladesh will benefit in respect of the pricing of cross-border risk by international financial institutions and that it would now get the opportunity to raise equity and debt required for large projects involving, for example, energy, power and infrastructure. What is more, foreign investors will now have a better insight into Bangladesh's potential as a good destination for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI).

So far so good. But just sitting on our laurels will not do. We need also to do the necessary homework to improve our conditions such as removing the bottlenecks in the infrastructure with particular stress on ensuring a steady supply of energy for the industries, improving overall political management and governance. For these are the necessary preconditions for attracting international creditors and investors on a sustainable basis.

Silence and shame



NAB UDUN AHMED

These are not isolated incidents and it is not as though these atrocities happened all of a sudden in the space of a few weeks. The truth is that horror stories like these happen all the time here.

ZAFAR SOBHAN

THE news today is of a 3-year-old girl who was lured into an abandoned building in the capital and raped, allegedly by two teenage boys.

Yesterday the news was of a 16-year-old schoolgirl who was burned to death by her stalker after she rejected his advances.

Last month the news was of the sensational double murder of the parents of a teenage girl when they tried to stop her abduction for forced marriage.

These are not isolated incidents and it is not as though these atrocities happened all of a sudden in the space of a few weeks. The truth is that horror stories like these happen

all the time here.

The only difference is that now more and more horrific episodes are coming to light as people are more willing to speak out and the press is more willing to pay attention.

It is long overdue. The fact is that Bangladesh has long suffered epidemic proportions of sexual violence against women and girls. The societal taboo against talking honestly about sex and society's tendency to shame and blame the victim and protect the abuser ensures that most sexual violence and abuse remains unreported.

Official statistics show only the very tip of the iceberg. But if you talk to social scientists or women's rights workers doing qualitative

research, they confirm the epidemic nature of the crisis.

Casual empiricism reveals the shocking extent of the abuse and violence. You don't have to look too far. Every woman has a horror story that happened to her or someone close. No one is unaffected.

The minute a girl is born, she becomes prey in our society. The sexual abuse of children is everywhere, helped along by the culture of silence that surrounds it.

Often the abuser is an older family member, with extended family living arrangements offering prime opportunities for rape and abuse. Girls keep their mouths shut about what happens because they know that no one would believe them or because they do not want to be the cause of tension and discord in the family.

Our culture of automatic obedience to elders and authority figures and the low status of women (especially young girls) within the family means that they very rarely

Fate is biology, biology is fate



While it's a double win for the rich, it's a double whammy for the poor. The scientists believe that psychological factors such as stress, shame, depression, poor social support and pessimism, make the body vulnerable to poor health.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

BACK in 1999, scientists made a powerful discovery. At the U.S. National Institute of Health Conference, they found a strong link between wealth level and physical well-being. People of lower social standing are more likely to develop a serious disease and die early compared to people of higher social standing. Cheese! It's not just lucky to be rich. It's also healthy.

This is the surplus value of luck's favour. Born with a golden spoon in the mouth, the rich encounter more golden opportunities in life than the poor. They get to earn more, and they get to spend more. They get to consume more, and they get to digest more. They get to inhale more, and they get to

exhale more. If the rich are favoured in birth, they are also favoured in death.

According to World Health Organisation (WHO), more than two-thirds of all people live beyond the age of 70 in high-income countries. In middle-income countries, nearly half of all people live to that age. In low-income countries less than a quarter of people live to grow that old.

Ten years ago, people would have thought the rich live longer because they have more access to medical care. Today that notion has changed. WHO and other health bureaucracies are convinced that inequality itself is the killer.

While it's a double win for the rich, it's a double whammy for the poor. The scientists believe that psychological factors such as stress, shame, depression, poor social sup-

port and pessimism, make the body vulnerable to poor health. Life is lot like a flat tire. Without any air support inside, it's pinched between the road and the wheel rim. Driving even a short distance wears it down.

It means wealth can bring cushion to life and protect it from its many frictions. The wealthy man is also a healthy man, because money can buy not only a bed but also sleeping pills. A poor person may sleep well at night, but he can hardly sleep on his misfortune. It eats away his health like a silent disease, even during his sound sleep.

Anup Shah writes in his essay Poverty Around The World that even in the United Kingdom, the average lifespan can differ by some 28 years depending on whether one is born in the poorer or wealthier strata of society. One Canadian study found that men in the top 20 percent income bracket live on average six years longer than those in the bottom 20 percent. For women, the difference was 3 years.

The Canadian experience suggests that people with more money, education and status tend to have more control and choices over things like where and how they want to live. Botox, Restalin and Juvederm. Blood

even tell anyone about the abuse, let alone report it.

Then, as soon as she is old enough to leave the house, there is the sexual harassment which goes by the name of eve-teasing in Bangladesh. Somehow the term doesn't quite capture the abuse that girls have to face as a matter of course.

For many, every day is a gauntlet of whistles, catcalls, suggestive comments, leering, rubbing, groping, touching. The impunity with which they are harassed sends its own message. The threat of more is omnipresent.

Rape is a sickeningly frequent crime, but you would never guess from the official statistics. The reason is simple: the shame that our society attaches to being raped.

More often than not, the victim will tell no one, and certainly won't report it to the authorities. To do so would be to ruin the family name, to put at risk one's own marriage prospects, to open oneself up to shame and scandal. The process for securing legal redress is painful and humiliating. Small wonder that most cases of rape are never reported.

This brings me to our collective failure as a decent society and our collective responsibility.

Where do the rapists and abusers and stalkers and harassers get the idea that they can act with impunity, safe in the knowledge that they are protected by society's misogyny and hypocrisy.

We might try to argue that this is the effect of Hindi films or the more sexualised western cultural values that are invading and supplanting our own.

But I am afraid the opposite is true. The truth is that this kind of violence and abuse follows, as night follows days, from our own indigenous cultural values.

Rape, sexual violence, and abuse are the natural consequences of a society where women are relegated to second-class status from the minute they are born.

The epidemic of sexual violence is also a result of our inability to talk openly about the issue. The squeamishness, the culture of shame, the culture of silence, all are profoundly unhealthy and, contribute to the culture of abuse.

Finally, there is a direct line between the culture of sexual repression and the culture of abuse. Pre-marital romantic relationships, even chaste ones, are condemned. The sexes are largely segregated. Small wonder that the society produces legions of sexually dysfunctional men.

This is not to minimise anyone's individual guilt. There can be no excuse and no tolerance for sexual violence and abuse. But unless we face up to how our misogynist, hypocritical, and sexually repressed society is complicit in creating this epidemic, then we will get no nearer to tackling it.

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filtering. Personal physicians on call. Air ambulance. The rich can afford good insurance, preventative care and exotic treatments to enhance life.

Russ Alan Prince is the president of Prince & Associates, Inc., the world's leading market research firm specialising in global private wealth. He has surveyed 431 individuals with net worth of at least \$1 million. About a third of his samples owned assets over \$10 million.

His conclusion is that money means longevity. The rich not only spend unbelievable sums to stay healthy but they throw atrocious amounts to look healthy as well. Prince's survey reveals that half the people in his survey already underwent plastic surgery, which includes laser treatment, facelift and earlobe restructuring.

Financial worries coupled with insufficient healthcare explain why an insolvent life burns out at a faster rate. In the 4th century BC, Greek philosopher Epicurus cautioned of a reverse risk. The troubles entailed in maintaining an extravagant life could often create its own pressure. He concluded that the pursuit of consumption beyond what's absolutely necessary for happiness, bodily comfort, and life itself should be either moderated or avoided.

Many super rich follow Epicurus's advice. The world's richest man Carlos Slim and American billionaire Warren Buffet don't own a yacht or private plane. Ingvar Kamrad, the founder of the Swedish furniture phenomenon Ikea, uses public transport to go to work. Another American billionaire Chuck Feeney flies economy class, buys clothes from retail stores, and keeps one pair of shoes at a time.

Healthy, wealthy and wise. The rich can claim all three, but the poor by default can be first and third at the most, or either of the two or neither. Discriminated by destiny, the consolation for the poor is that it will be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

Money buys comfort, security, and even longevity. The rich are born lucky. Fate is their biology. For the poor, biology is fate. They are damn lucky just to be born.