

Menacing billboards

Regulatory approach needed to save public from lurking dangers

DESPITE loss of some lives a couple of weeks back from a toppling billboard, a large number of them still remain precariously balanced on rooftops right before the eyes of the administration. Rajuk and the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) have no idea as to how many illegal billboards are installed on Dhaka's rooftops. One estimate says that there are around 4,000 such structures, with 90 percent of them being billboards on rooftops. There is every possibility that some of those billboards will claim more lives as the month of Baishakh is fast approaching with the message of sudden storms and gusty wind.

What is most disconcerting is the fact that the owners of the billboards and the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) seem to be unperturbed by the deaths and injury caused by the falling structures. The High Court (HC) directive concerning demolishing of the illegal billboards goes unheeded as owners are apt to point to HC stay order given earlier that prevented the authorities concerned from dismantling some of them. A HC bench on March 22, 2010 had directed DCC to dismantle all unauthorised billboards, but earlier the HC bench in an order on December 10, 2007 had stopped Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha, the DCC and the police from dismantling rooftop billboards until a writ petition filed by Outdoor Advertising Owners' Association (OAOA) is disposed of. Why this conceptual mix up as the latest HC order of 2010 should hold good barring some exceptions which await disposal of writs? Why are the unauthorised billboard owners are taking advantage of the temporary stay order when the general order is for demolition of illegal structures?

What is veritably surprising is that allegedly none of the rooftop structures are authorised nor do the owners pay any tax for them.

Basically, we therefore believe that all these anomalies provide impelling reasons for immediately formulating a set of rules whereby installation of billboards and hoarding will be governed with due deference to the aesthetic of the landscape, beauty and alignment in the city and, above all, safety of the public and environment around them.

Maoist insurgency fall-out in India

Indian home minister's resignation offer

INDIAN Home Minister P. Chidambaram's offer of resignation in the face of the massacre of 76 security personnel in an ambush by Maoist guerrillas brings two important points to the fore. The first is of course an image of democracy as it should be working. By offering to quit and by taking full responsibility for the tragedy, Chidambaram has only underscored the vitality along which Indian democracy, warts and all, continues to function. At a time when not many men and women in powerful positions around the world are willing to admit failure or acknowledge responsibility for failures that go wrong, Chidambaram's act truly reflects the spirit in which a democratic system of government should work. A fundamental principle of such a system is the readiness of the individual at the top to be fully accountable for everything done in and by his organization. That his resignation has not been accepted is of course another matter.

The second point here relates to the increasing ferocity with which the Maoist guerrillas have been making themselves heard across wider swathes of India. Indeed, there are at this point centres where these radical leftists have a free run of the place, to a point where they have set up training camps and the like and have, as part of their ideological programme, attracted the poor and the disadvantaged from many sections of the population. In recent weeks, Indian security forces, for all their determination to root out the guerrillas, have found themselves in serious difficulties. Paradoxically, however, there is the other side of the story as well. It is that the Maoists, having more or less operated at will in the matter of recruitment and training of their young followers, have lately felt the pressure of the security forces. That their back could be up against the wall is not something that can be easily dismissed. It can, therefore, be argued that the killing of the 76 security people was an act of desperation on the part of the Maoists.

There is little question that a quelling of Maoist activities is of intense concern for the Indian authorities, given that the guerrillas now are reported to be operating in 20 of India's 28 states. With anywhere between 10,000 and 20,000 guerrillas operating, the Maoists are a clear and present danger to India and the democracy it has espoused since it became a free country in 1947. More tellingly, unless the Indian authorities are able to tackle the menace, the ramifications of the Maoist revolt may be felt beyond the country's borders. Chidambaram is on record with his offer of talks with the rebels. One will simply have to wait and see the response, of there is any at all. The alternative is focused action to put an end to the danger. Either way, stopping the guerrillas is a necessity if, in the future, India's democracy is not to haemorrhage.

Testing the limits of tolerance

While the war crimes trials are absolutely necessary to bring back law and order, the government would be well advised to rein in students who claim they belong to the ruling party and are involved in illegal acts, to bring down prices of essentials so they are affordable, and to resolve the sufferings of the common people.

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

THE current electricity, water and gas crises, coupled with high prices of daily consumption goods for the middle and the poor classes, and compounded with low prices received by agricultural product growers, have put the present government on the defensive.

The ever-critical opposition is on the warpath, reminding people of their "mistake" in endorsing the Mahajot combine in the last election. Though we are used to blame game politics, it is doubtful how seriously people take the hatao sarkar movement threatened by the emasculated BNP-Jamaat combine.

The government's problem is that the electricity-water-gas assault on people is due to these issues' interconnectivity and hence cannot be resolved without jointly considering all components.

The people are wary of the opposition's hidden agenda, the most immediate being to disrupt the war crimes trials, a subject on which almost complete unanimity exists throughout Bangladesh and abroad.

Allied with the trial is the possibility of banning religion-based politics, though the government refuses to combine the two issues.

The trial is needed to blot out from the national conscience a long-festered cancer and to reconfirm the position of Bangladesh as a member of the civilised community of nations.

Barring a few rogue and failing states, the duty to protect and the duty to prevent endorsed by the UN summit is the

transcendental sacred duty of humanity. Fortunately for Bangladesh, with the demise of communism, the struggle for power is less ideological and more about sharing the pie.

Bangladesh rejoices at the revival of democracy that Prof Larry Diamond characterised as "the fallacy of electoralism." Diamond contends: "Many in these countries, especially the poor, are citizens only in name and have few meaningful channels of political participation. There are elections, but they are contests between corrupt, clientistic parties. There are parliaments and local governments, but they do not represent the broad constituencies. There are constitutions but not constitutionalism."

Diamond's indictment, however harsh, does not prescribe solutions for averting the fallacy of electoralism. In reviewing John Kampfner's *Freedom for Sale*, John Dunn mentions Kampfner's principal thesis as most people in most places, when offered the choice, will sacrifice much of their liberty and of others, with little hesitation, in return for gratifying levels of personal consumption.

The vector, Kampfner adds, of any durable dominion is a balance between threat and reward. A gun barrel, he says, is clearly a more comprehensible and compelling signal than ideology.

Through the passage of civilisation, mankind has discovered democracy to be superior to monarchy, technocracy, theocracy, or any other form of government, but this passage has been long and perilous.



Where's the change?

Besides, elections, in themselves, do not necessarily guarantee equality or good governance. Authorities of countries like Bangladesh, having experienced interruptions in democracy, face an eternal question: whether delivery of consumable goods should take priority over political goods, though the delivery of one without the other is difficult if not impossible.

John Dunn cites Singapore as an example as a small and rich country which, thus far, has been able to "stage a carefully constrained charade of elections." One may also cite China as an example where authoritarian rulers have supplied goods and services to people, at modest prices, even accepting the premise that the price of goods is relative to the buyer's real income.

Given the income disparity between the rich and the poor, and urban and rural populations, it is uncertain if Francis Fukuyama's proclamation of the end of history will become prophetic, in the sense that one cannot preserve all the achievements of capitalism while categorically rejecting the forms of owner-

ship of the means of production.

Future events in China will determine democracy's sustainability and its monopolistic claim to rule the world. Whether US hegemony, advocated by historian Niall Ferguson, who believes that the alternative to a single superpower is not a multi-lateral utopia but an anarchic nightmare, is necessary to attain this objective is debatable -- and such hegemony is unlikely to be accepted by the international community.

In our case, while the war crimes trials are absolutely necessary to bring back law and order, the government would be well advised to rein in students who claim they belong to the ruling party and are involved in illegal acts, to bring down prices of essentials so they are affordable, and to resolve the sufferings of the common people from the trio mentioned earlier.

Ultimately, the people's happiness is the only thing that will determine whether the incumbent will return to power in the next election.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

A flicker of hope in Palestine



DAFNA TALMON GETTY IMAGES

Israel has been behaving like a spoilt child ever since it defeated the Arab armies in 1967 and occupied the West Bank and Gaza. Since then, Israeli government policy has been guided by one overriding objective, i.e., never to allow the creation of a viable independent Palestinian state on contiguous land.

CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM

EMPOWERED by his recent success in reforming the US healthcare system and in reaching an arms control treaty with Russia, President Barack Hussein Obama has finally told Israel "enough is enough." What is interesting is that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the great defender of the concept of Greater Israel, unwittingly provided him with the opportunity to do so.

It has also demonstrated how far removed the Israeli right is from reality and how wrong it is about the character and resolve of Barack Obama. In any case, all of a sudden, establishing an independent Palestinian state before the end of Obama's first term does not sound like a crazy idea.

Israel has been behaving like a spoilt child ever since it defeated the Arab armies in 1967 and occupied the West Bank and Gaza. Since then, Israeli government policy has been guided by one overriding objective, i.e., never to allow the creation of a viable independent Palestinian state on contiguous land.

While paying lip service to peace

negotiations, Israel has pursued, and is still pursuing, a policy of ruthless colonisation. It has dotted the whole of West Bank with hundreds of garrison-like settlements, separation walls, fenced highways connecting the settlements (for settlers' use only), watchtowers and innumerable checkpoints.

Leaving aside the day-to-day suffering and humiliation inflicted on the Palestinians, this policy has destroyed the Palestinian economy and has produced ever smaller and disconnected Palestinian enclaves, like the apartheid-era South African Bantustans.

When the Likud's leaders talk of a two-state solution, this is what they really mean -- on one side there will be the strong Israeli state controlling every aspect of the Palestinian life and on the other innumerable demilitarised Palestinian enclaves, totally dependent on Israel for their economic subsistence.

At the same time, Israel has converted the Gaza strip, with a population of 1.5 million, as the largest open-air prison on earth by sealing it off completely.

What has America's reaction been to all this? Actually, it is sad to write that all this has been made possible by "unremitting US military, economic and diplomatic support" (Prof. Chomsky). The United States has turned a blind eye to all of Israel's nefarious activities. It has vetoed innumerable UN resolutions condemning Israel. It has provided direct military aid of \$3 billion dollars to Israel on an annual basis.

America's long acquiescence in Israeli colonisation of the Palestinian territories and other aggressive activities in the Middle East has created a feeling in Israel that it can always count on America's support, no matter what it does -- targeted killings, massacres (Intifadas of 1987 and 2000), indiscriminate bombings (Gaza in 2009), full-scale invasions of neighbouring countries (Lebanon in 1982 and 2006), relentless settlement activities and even insulting its only benefactor in the world, the United States. There is a feeling that it can get away with anything.

This feeling of impunity has recently led Israel to make a number of mistakes. Taking advantage of the hospitality offered by the Dubai government to the Israeli female tennis champion Shahar Harel to participate in a tennis tournament, Israel assassinated a Palestinian leader in Dubai, causing huge embarrassment to the Arab country. The use of fake EU passports by the killers was also much criticised by the EU governments.

It was insolent and unwise on the part of Netanyahu to describe Obama's principal advisers, Rahm Emanuel and David Axelrod as "self-hating Jews." US Vice-President Joe Biden is a great champion of Israel. On a recent trip to Israel, when he was vowing America's "absolute, total and unvarnished commitment to Israel's security," the Israeli government announced plans to build 1,600 new housing units in the Arab part of Jerusalem.

This was a deliberate insult to the Obama administration. Hillary Clinton, who, until now, has always shown her unconditional support to Israel lambasted Netanyahu for 43

minutes on the phone. David Axelrod called this snub as "an affront" and a "very, very destructive" step.

Netanyahu is so out of touch with the new reality in Washington or so full of ego that instead of announcing the cancellation of the plan to build these new housing units in East Jerusalem, he went to Washington and delivered a speech to the Jewish conservative lobby, American Israel Public Affairs Committee, in which he insisted on building these housing units because he did not, "Jerusalem is not a settlement."

He did not, of course, mention anything about the 21 UN resolutions which had forbidden any alteration of the physical, political and demographic fabric of Jerusalem and had called for Israeli withdrawal from the land conquered in 1967. Needless to say, Netanyahu's insult and defiance did not amuse Obama, who had no compunction in conveying his displeasure to him in their recent meeting at the White House.

Obama wants to keep the pressure on Netanyahu. He wants the current ultra-conservative coalition government to fall, which would facilitate the creation of a new coalition government of Likud and Kadima. There has also been a shift of opinion among the American Jews. Many seem to realise now that what is in the best interest of the ultra-orthodox settlers is not necessarily in the best interest of Israel in the long run and definitely not in the best interest of the US.

General David Petraeus, the hero of America's war in Iraq and Afghanistan, recently stated that the festering Israeli-Palestinian conflict "fosters anti-American sentiments across the Muslim world, which complicates life for American soldiers." Therefore, it is not in the interest of the US to continue with this farce of "endless talk and no action" while the colonisation of Palestinian land continues unabated.

Vice-President Biden repeated the same warning by saying that continued occupation of Palestinian territories "undermine America's vital interests" in the world. According to some analysts, the United States is now willing to impose a permanent settlement on the Israelis and the Palestinians in less than two years. Let us see how Israel reacts. The ball is now in its court.

Chaklader Mahboob-ul Alam is a columnist for The Daily Star.