

Bhola by-election

It is for all to ensure peaceful polls

THE Bhola by-election is being held today in the backdrop of allegations of intimidation, recrimination and blame and counter-blame by both the major parties. Through this column we had in the past stressed the need for a fair and peaceful by-election in Bhola, and we would like to underscore again the need to ensure that it is so.

By-election in any democratic dispensation is a normal process, but nowhere does it engender so much passion and enthusiasm as in Bangladesh, to the extent that it appears to become the be-all and end-all of politics. More so if the by-election happens to be held soon after a new party has taken over the reins of power.

The Bhola by-election has been necessitated by the seat falling vacant after a High Court verdict had declared the 2008 Bhola polls null because the incumbent MP, belonging to the ruling AL, did not qualify as a candidate in the first place. That being the reason for the fresh poll, the by-poll has acquired a very different character because of the way the AL and BNP have approached the issue. On both sides of the political fence, our parties tend to greatly exaggerate the meaning of any by-election result. A victory or a defeat will hardly affect the power balance in any tangible manner. Yet both parties have gone about electioneering as if their life depended on it. It is this exaggerated meaning of the verdict that make them behave in such a confrontational manner.

We would like to suggest that by-poll results are merely indicative and not absolute since it involves a single constituency out of three hundred. It would be the earnest hope of everyone that all concerned would see that the polls are held fairly and peacefully, without intimidation or let, and the EC is allowed to do its job.

Also, it is very important that both parties respect the verdict, whatever that may be. But more importantly, the two would do well to take lessons from the result of the ballot and use that to run the future course of their political activity. We also hope that the zest that has been displayed during the recent campaign would be reflected inside the parliament too, because it would serve the voters poorly if, after so much enthusiasm, we are to see the House bereft of the opposition MPs as we saw happen during the greater part of the current parliament.

Utilising funds in education sector

Need to free it from corruption

THE need for proper and, more particularly, corruption-free utilisation of funds in the education sector, as stressed by the education minister recently at a seminar, cannot be over-emphasised. And since, the sector is considered prone to corruption and the allocation to it is increasing by the year, especial attention is to be paid to see that the funds allocated in this sector are not misused or wasted.

It is worth mentioning that the teachers, especially in primary education, are not paid well and this important sub-sector is in a quandary, although timely distribution of textbooks has been a marked improvement. That brings to the fore the need for rationalisation of allocation with a focus around this level of education.

But before ensuring proper utilisation of educational funds, it is important to identify the loopholes through which the corruption takes place. And as in every other case of corruption, it is again the administration that handles educational funds should be brought under closer scrutiny.

So, as the first step towards ensuring a corruption-free education system, it would be necessary to overhaul the education administration from the ministry level down to the managing committee of the primary schools. Unless the managing committees are staffed with professional people instead of partisan elements, removal of corruption and other forms of malpractices will remain a far cry.

One cannot but agree with this lofty goal of the new education policy as conceived by the government and spelt out by the education minister. But how is the government going to achieve that?

It is only through addressing systemic lacunae in the educational administration that the slogan of eradicating educational corruption can be materialised.

Since corruption or mismanagement of funds starts at the top level of the administration, the first task would be to ensure that the leadership at the top cannot be touched by corruption or any partisan interest.

Obviously, mere exhortations and expression of pious wishes will not do. Appropriate institutional reforms will have to be carried out to make the system foolproof. There are volumes of recommendations awaiting implementation in this regard. The government should now prioritise the goal for a new, need-oriented, dynamic and corruption-free education system.

Of distorted and derailed investigation

Experienced observers are of the view that the investigating agencies shall continue to remain inactive and incapacitated until the political authorities decide to treat criminal violence as a purely criminal phenomenon and desist from interfering in the investigative process.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THIS scribe for quite some time has been venturing, apparently unsuccessfully, to impress upon the prime necessity of conducting credible and unbiased criminal investigation of all cases, particularly the nationally significant ones. As such, *The Daily Star's* editorial premonition (April 16) about the lack of desirable progress in the Ramna Batamul blast case and other such incidents came as a vindication of the public concern of the unsatisfactory state of affairs in this regard.

One would like to know the role of investigators and why there has been a serious shortfall in the desired performance. It needs to be stated that the most obvious function of the investigator is to locate the persons who have committed crimes, collect the evidence against them and bring them to courts to be dealt with according to law.

Investigation of an offence is the field exclusively reserved for the executive principally through the police, the superintendence over which vests in the government. The executive is charged with keeping vigilance over law and order, and it is its bounden responsibility to investigate into a criminal offence and bring the offender to book.

The powers of the investigators are laid down in the Criminal Procedure Code, but the qualifications that an investigator must possess is largely an abstract subject, law and procedure cannot guide it and in reality is often an individual trait. The investigator must not start with a pre-conceived notion and should strive to bring out the unvarnished truth.

In view of the above stipulations, both mandatory and directorial, what has gone wrong? Why have the high profile cases not

been resolved? Was there a cynical attempt to shift the blame, as suspected, and were there attempts to exploit pathetic incidents in a politically partisan manner? Has undesirable delay prejudiced the investigation, thereby protecting the criminals and irreparably harming the victims?

In the fitness of things, every criminal case should be disposed of on its own merit. That is the ideal. There are, however, objective conditions in Bangladesh to doubt that the fate of some cases, if not many, did not have the benefit of such ideal standard. In our situation, it would be necessary to dwell upon certain facts and circumstances of our socio-political existence and, in particular, the perilous political polarisation of our society that has a definite bearing upon the basic regulatory function of investigation by the state agency, the police.

In venturing to put things in some perspective, it may be pertinent to remember that the pernicious culture of playing to the tune of unscrupulous political masters or the pandering to their unholy wishes by the investigating agencies and other sensitive state agencies has not occurred all on a sudden.

Spells of unconstitutional rule, particularly during 1982-90, have substantially damaged the ethos of our public service, including the investigating agencies. While leadership deficits account for some malfeasance, the real damage was done by an insensitive and myopic dictatorial establishment that was hell-bent on screwing all regulatory and corrective institutions. The unwholesome effect of such institution-bashing is now being felt by a concerned citizenry.

While the public's right to be informed cannot be denied and the nation's concern for the safety and security of innocent lives cannot be brushed aside, we will do well to

look at the factual dimension of the bomb blasts in a dispassionate manner. Almost immediate apportioning of blame, mostly on rivals of the other camp, by responsible persons after each occurrence became a pathetic recurrent reality. Indiscreet and uninformed comments in such sensitive matters further compounded the environment in our society.

The sad reality is that every time a heinous crime involving serious loss of lives occurs, we have to helplessly look for external assistance without realising how galling such a scenario is to the national honour. It does not serve much purpose to delve into the locus standi or the legality of external agencies' role in our criminal investigation, but what must concern us are the factors that have brought us to such a pretty pass.

Our citizens need to know why our investigating outfit has to live with the double stigma of being partisan and inefficient. One may ask why our national level political leaders openly impute motives on the part of our investigators and cast doubt on their integrity. Who has failed whom? Have political leaders encouraged and abetted the malfeasance of the investigators?

Are we victims of misplaced priorities because of the follies of myopic policymakers and malevolent professionals? In misplaced exuberance, have we extolled the benefits of the so-called crossfire to the detriment of cultivating a scientific culture in law enforcement? These are queries that need to be pondered in serious earnest.

Now may be the time when we must find out why the investigative efficiency of the police has deteriorated so sharply over the years and whether such efficiency can be regained in isolation without setting the expected organisational goal of the police. It may also be appropriate now to know the pattern of resource allocation for increasing the professional competence of investigative outfits. We may have to know if there is a lack of proper emphasis in fixing priorities and deciding the core functions of police in a pluralist society like ours.

We have to appreciate that the cumulative neglect towards increasing the investigative efficiency over the last decade has brought us to a situation where we are

uncomfortably witnessing external agencies dealing with matters on our soil, in which we may at best seek expert opinion only. Purchasing lethal weapons may serve inadequately explained goals, but investigation has to be scientific and level-headed to prove equal to the stress following an incident and credible enough to withstand the subsequent test of rigorous scrutiny in the court of law.

Experienced observers are of the view that the investigating agencies shall continue to remain inactive and incapacitated until the political authorities decide to treat criminal violence as a purely criminal phenomenon and desist from interfering in the investigative process. Immediate actions to secure the place of occurrence for preservation of physical evidence will not follow if the investigators remain in a state of bewilderment following the enormity of any such incident.

The institution capacity building, insofar as it relates to modern scientific investigation, is not on anybody's priority list. No wonder that after each incident there is a demand for impartial investigation by a foreign or international agency on account of alleged lack of investigative acumen, in addition to political and psychological factors. The question is: how do we get out of this impasse?

If we are not willing to forsake one of the primary state functions we cannot lose any further time in modernising our investigative outfit. Must we not realise that calling a foreign investigation agency to conduct its activities on our soil amounts to a disgraceful admission of our operational and administrative inefficiency?

What we need to plug the gaps in this regard is investment on capital machineries and training. However, equipping the investigators will not serve the purpose if investigation does not become the unaffected and unfettered jurisdiction of the investigator. The inaction and the resultant incapacity characterising each incident of serious violence hangs heavy on the national scene. The need, therefore, is to empower the investigators by lawful directives and ensure the growth of a healthy political climate for peaceful resolution.

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Overcoming water crisis



The present water crisis was not created in a day. Years of neglect and lack of proper planning have resulted in this situation. Overcoming it may take at least 5 to 6 years if the mobilisation of men, material and money can be arranged in time.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

THE people of Dhaka are passing through a severe water crisis, which may become worse in the near future. Every year, we face this crisis and the situation, as it appears, is deteriorating. The Water and Sewerage Authority (Wasa) has admitted that it is beyond their capacity to overcome the crisis alone.

The present crisis is due to lack of coordination among the ministries involved with city development, such as the ministries of industry, agriculture, environment, law and commerce.

In fact, it is not right to blame only Wasa because the government has failed to pay enough attention to production and distribution of useable water for the people of a very rapidly growing city with a large number of small and medium industries around it.

Long neglect and lukewarm attention

from concerned authorities to the question of existing and probable future problems of water for the people of the metropolis have brought us to this state.

We wonder as to whether there was ever any serious, clear and close discussion at the appropriate levels about extraction of underground water or even preservation and storage of surface water.

We have a department of environment and BIWTA for looking after the environmental problems of the city, and a ministry to see to the navigability of the rivers Buriganga, Sitalakhya, Turag and Balu. We have the ministry of industry to fix the locations of industries. We have the ministry of commerce to solve the problems relating to supplies of commodities to the people. Despite the existence of these bodies we are now facing one of the worst water crises in history.

The present water crisis was not created in a day. Years of neglect and lack of proper

planning have resulted in this situation. Overcoming it may take at least 5 to 6 years if the mobilisation of men, material and money can be arranged in time.

Despite this grim picture we may have at least some consolation that the prime minister will open the second water treatment plant at Sayedabad in May. This plant will supply 220 million liters of good quality water/day. It is also learnt that government has completed plans for two more water treatment plants, one to be located at Khilkhet and other near Pagla, for supply of two hundred million liters of water/day.

Not long ago there were many canals and swamps around Dhaka. Due to increase in population, setting up of around three and a half thousand small and medium industries, and throwing of effluents in these rivers there is heavy pollution of the waters of major rivers, which has resulted in loss of fish and pollution of the agricultural land all around.

Extraction of ground water has reached a dangerous level. 85 percent of Wasa water comes from underground extraction and surface water provides only 15 percent. 1300 million litres of water are extracted every day, while the maximum limit for extraction of ground water should be 230 million litres/day. This lowers the level of ground water by 3 metres/year.

With regard to surface water Wasa depends on the rivers around Dhaka but, due to continuous discharge of industrial effluents from industrial plants, the waters of Buriganga and Sitalakhya have become unfit for treatment.

The chief of Wasa has stated that without active support and cooperation from all concerned it will be impossible for it to overcome the crisis alone. We are inclined to accept the observation of the Wasa chief. In fact, sincere and well-concerted effort is needed. It is learnt that the government is considering the constitution of a taskforce consisting of members from Wasa, Rehab, the Directorate of Environment, and Dhaka University.

A hard truth is that corruption in Wasa must be brought down to a tolerable limit. Wasa's weak statistical base must be strengthened. Let us not hear any more statements based mainly on assumption or made-up figures.

Smooth water supply is essential for investment and development. There may be shortage of manpower, equipment and finance, but with sincere, serious and vigorous effort and cooperation from the common, influential and powerful people the problem of water may be solved.

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