

Begunbari and Nimtoli disasters

Let us also observe 'national accountability day'

THE observance of national mourning day yesterday in memory of the victims of the Nimtoli blaze and Begunbari building collapse was yet more reason and opportunity for the country to reflect on the two tragedies that have left us all scarred and grieving. These heart-rending happenings, we need hardly say, will leave permanent marks on our collective consciousness. More tellingly, they will always serve as a reminder of all the things that government over the past many decades has not done to make life safe and secure for citizens. There is absolutely no excusing the authorities for the gross lapses in the way they have exercised, or not exercised, their responsibilities in ensuring citizens' safety in as densely populated a city as Dhaka. Which is why we believe that the time has come for us not merely to observe mourning days but also a 'national accountability day', for it has been a huge absence of accountability that has brought the nation to such a pass.

We have seen a clear absence of urban planning or deviation from codes relating to such planning making casualties of lives and property year after year. Every year people have died from collapsing buildings or fires and all that the authorities have done after such tragedies is to inform us that those who built the structures did not follow procedures and rules. Such explanations, we have always said and we say so again, have never held water. They are simply not acceptable because when an individual violates the rules and goes into building a structure in defiance of the rules, it is for authorities such as Rajuk or the city corporation to take swift action. In the case of Begunbari, where one more building has tilted dangerously, no one in authority saw any reason to keep track of building code violations. Likewise, in Old Dhaka, there has been absolutely no action against people who have in unbridled manner set up small factories and the like on their residential premises, with little thought to the consequences. Where have Rajuk, the city corporation and the works ministry been while all this culture of impunity was in progress? Observe the effrontery with which Rajuk and DCC officials now tell us that building codes were not maintained by the owners of the endangered structures. It is simply unbelievable and unacceptable. How did building owners have the audacity to defy the rules?

When we speak of a 'national accountability day', we do not do so in a light vein. In our opinion, this culture of impunity, which has now acquired monstrous proportions, must be firmly suppressed. We wonder how individuals wielding executive authority allowed such a culture to take such deep, and deepening, roots. We are also intrigued that all these major urban disasters have occurred in the past two decades when elected governments have held office alternately. That should not have been the case, for elected governments ought by nature to plug all the holes which might threaten social order and human life. In the matter of the recent tragic accidents, all the signs were there of disasters waiting to happen. They could happen again. Can we expect, in light of the enormity of the disasters of these past few days, the authorities to get out of the ostrich-like position they have always adopted as building codes and rules were being flouted with unimaginable impunity?

The looming crisis in the Korean peninsula

The situation demands a strong, clear and pragmatic approach

ONE cannot but observe with disquiet the developments in the Korean peninsula since the sinking of a South Korean vessel near the inter-Korean maritime border on 26 March. An international inquiry has pointed the finger at North Korea with evidence that appear incontrovertible. In the absence of more convincing evidence to the contrary, it is hard to negate the findings of the joint investigation group.

Not only South Korea, which lost 46 sailors in the incident, but also all those that want an aura of amity in the region, consider it an irresponsible and gravely provocative act; and for this North Korea must be held solely responsible. It deserves condemnation by all including Bangladesh. The international community needs to send out a clear message to the North that such actions amount to an 'act of war' and can not be tolerated.

We are worried to see the region cast into uncertainty. One cannot miss the direct threat in the pronouncements of the North, against what it sees as deliberate provocation from the South, that it would not hesitate to put into force practical military measures to defend its waters. It has even suggested that war could erupt at anytime. Such rhetoric, along with North Korea's plan to freeze inter-Korean relations, to totally abrogate the agreement on non-aggression with South Korea, and to completely halt inter-Korean cooperation, is a great setback to the process of peace in the region.

The South, for its part, has apparently chosen a less belligerent posture and has restricted its action to only freezing trade relations with the North and referring the matter to the UN, along with seeking financial sanctions against its neighbour.

The Korean peninsula has been a strategic flashpoint since the beginning of the Cold War, and has remained so for a long time with brief interregnums of positive moves, from both the countries, to improve bilateral ties, as we saw in the late 90s. Unfortunately, the positive atmosphere has been dealt a blow. The latest turn of events cannot but raise the concerns of those that would not like to see the region relapse to the Cold War era.

The crisis calls for a coolheaded approach to de-escalate tension and not rhetoric that helps only to vitiate the already charged atmosphere. One sees here also the importance of the role of the regional countries in using their influence to help curb belligerence and renounce provocative acts either through words or deeds.

The dangerous consequences of a conflagration in the peninsula must not be lost upon all, particularly the primary parties. Whatever may be the rationale of the North for the provocations, it would be wrong to exploit the compulsions of geopolitical constraints of others, for seemingly strategic gains, which might boomerang eventually.



How many more tragedies can we endure?

Disaster city

The buck must stop at the gates of the authorities. If such a tragedy had befallen any other democracy, lets say Japan the minister in charge would step down. Bangladesh is not there yet on the sliding scale of democracy. But that should not stop us from reflecting on what can be done and how.

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WHY are we so good at mourning deaths and so bad at preventing disasters that cause those unscheduled deaths? I raise this question to illustrate how culture, governance and disaster planning are entangled and reinforce one another. A national mourning was observed on Saturday June 5, which went without a hitch. And of course, the nation should grieve together, shed tears, spare a thought for the families of the victims but the government and all those who matter should contemplate how such tragedies could happen right under their nose and what can be done to prevent such catastrophes in the future.

It is time for taking responsibility and not passing the buck. The buck must stop at the gates of the authorities. If such a tragedy had befallen any other democracy, lets say Japan, the minister in charge would step down. Bangladesh is not there yet on the sliding scale of democracy. But that should not stop us from reflecting on what can be done and how.

First, a thorough investigation must take place to dig out the facts of the matter, establish causes of the two tragedies (building

collapse at Begunbari and conflagration at Nimtoli). The main purpose of such an investigation should be to establish a solid preventive strategy to avoid such urban disasters in the future. And yes, those who are culpable for issuing building permits and allowing shoddy building construction in exchange of bribes must be brought to book.

Corruption is one of the major causes of such urban disasters. Strengthening disaster preparedness must begin with the improvement of governance. And here one should take a closer look at the administrative architecture before scrutinising the structural properties of the buildings. Again, this does not mean dispatching a rag-tag team of demolishers who would end up killing themselves while trying to remove unauthorised structures with inadequate equipment.

The building collapse of Begunbari shows not just the weakness of those structures but also the palpable shoddiness of Rajuk. According to a Bengali newspaper, a Rajuk official has filed a case at Tejgaon police station against the builder of that unfortunate house which collapsed on less-fortunate tin-shed neighbors leaving a trail of death and destruction.

Brig. Gen. Abu Nayeem Md Shahidullah, director general of Fire Service and Civil Defense, in a preliminary assessment speculated four probable causes of the fire of Nimtoli in old Dhaka which occurred days after the Begunbari tragedy. According to The Daily Star, (June 5) Brig. General Nayeem thought that the blaze "might have been started from an oil-fired oven or from the chemical go-down or transformer blasts or a tea stall in front of the building."

Other newspapers, such as *Amader Shomoy*, (June 5) reported the presence of a storage in one of the houses of "plastics, old papers and chemicals" and local fire officials on the ground mentioned the preparation of a feast for an engagement (*Panchini*) party on the ground floor that involved open-air cooking, others attributed a local bake-shop as a possible source of the fire.

It is premature to indulge in further speculations before the investigations are complete but one can surmise that a compound of factors transformed an ordinary fire to a conflagration. But one can see in all these scattered reports an amalgam of outmoded cultural practices, lack of governance and inadequate disaster preparedness. A precondition to enhancing disaster mitigation capability is acquiring appropriate knowledge. There is a huge gap in that regard.

At the risk of being immodest, I would quote myself from an op-ed I wrote in these pages following the earthquake of Haiti. In "From Port-au-Prince to Dhaka" (The Daily Star, January 24, 2010), I wrote: "Any natural calamity is only a 'natural calamity' in part. To a large extent, natural calamity, whether a tsunami or earthquake or cyclone, is medi-

ated by existing socio-economic factors in which quality of governance plays an important role." I would add fire and urban disasters to that list of catastrophes.

I also wrote: "While lack of disaster preparedness is an immediate problem and, to be fair, no administration is adequately prepared for a disaster of such a magnitude. ...Of many instances of poor governance, enforcement of housing codes is a glaring one. ...The poor building standards contributed directly towards magnifying the death and destruction caused by the earthquake. ...Given the poor enforcement of housing codes and the high level of corruption in the various departments concerned with approving plans and enforcing building codes, Bangladesh risks a huge catastrophe. Rather than being alarmist, one must be concerned with careful disaster planning. ...Under such conditions, contingency planning is of utmost importance. A national disaster preparedness plan must be drawn involving all the stakeholders. And the time is now."

The fire department and civil defense is not adequately equipped to deal with such disasters. I spent one afternoon talking to the fire brigade officials during one of my visits to Dhaka in December, 2009. I did not see any lack of motivation or preparedness but voices were raised about inadequate equipment. In my pep talk, I called them "unsung heroes." But dedication without equipment is not enough when facing a disaster.

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Secret no more

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AS the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference concludes in New York, the United States-led Western powers are focussing on West Asia, because they want Iran to freeze its nuclear activities. But inevitably, attention is riveted on Israel, the region's sole nuclear weapons-state (NWS).

Against this backdrop comes the sensational disclosure that Israel sold nuclear warheads to apartheid South Africa in 1975, and the two coordinated their military programs and strategic approaches.

This is revealed in US-based scholar Sasha Pulakow-Suransky's just-published *The Unspoken Alliance: Israel's Secret Relationship with Apartheid South Africa*, based on recently declassified "top secret" minutes of top-level bipartisan meetings.

The disclosure will seriously embarrass Israel, whose intransigence against ending its illegal occupation of Palestine is increasingly isolating it internationally.

The book says South Africa's defence minister P.W. Botha asked for nuclear warheads when he met Shimon Peres, Israel's then defence minister and now its president, who agreed. They signed a wide-ranging pact on bilateral military relations, with a clause stipulating its "very existence" must remain secret.

These military relations were crucial -- Israel supplied South Africa with arms when it faced international economic-military sanctions. South Africa is believed to have made six nuclear weapons, which it destroyed before apartheid ended.

The disclosures undermine Israel's "nu-

clear ambiguity" policy of neither confirming nor denying nuclear weapons possession. Other sources, including Israeli whistleblower Mordechai Vanunu, confirm that Israel has 200 to 300 nuclear warheads.

The book also demolishes Israel's claim that it's a "responsible" state which wouldn't use nuclear weapons even if it had them -- supposedly, unlike Iran. But a nation which helped pariah South Africa overcome richly-deserved international isolation and supplied it mass-destruction weapons cannot be "responsible."

South Africa wanted nuclear weapons as a deterrent and for potential attacks upon its neighbours -- just as Israel did, and still does.

No state in modern history has been more inhumanly discriminatory than apartheid South Africa, a rogue state. Zionist Israel is in the same league.

Pulakow-Suransky shows that Israel's formally offered to sell South Africa nuclear-capable Jericho missiles in March 1975. Present at the talks was South African military chief R.E. Armstrong whose "top secret" memorandum detailed the missiles' benefits for South Africa -- but only if they were fitted with nuclear warheads.

After the 1973 Yom Kippur war, Israel was short of uranium, of which South Africa has large reserves. Israel also needed hard currency. It got both by selling conventional weapons, and by sharing nuclear know-how with South Africa and converting some of its yellowcake (mixed oxides of uranium) into weapons-grade plutonium.

The Israel-South Africa alliance was strategic. In 1987, Israel adopted some sanctions against South Africa, but continued with existing arms contracts worth

hundreds of millions of dollars.

The alliance was based less on military imperatives than on the two leaderships' shared belief that theirs were two relatively small nations guarding "their land" and "identity" in a hostile environment. Both wanted to perpetuate their privileged colonial settlers' power.

Their self-assigned role as regional bulwarks against Communism brought them Western support -- until global opinion turned against apartheid. Israel forgot that Nazi sympathisers had helped put apartheid's architects into power.

In a secret deal, South Africa lifted safeguards on 450 tonnes of yellowcake sold to Israel, in return for tritium, used as a nuclear weapons booster. Israel bailed out a South African politician whose bankruptcy would have jeopardised the deal.

This revelation proves that Israel was cynically culpable of nuclear proliferation.

Israel had clandestine dealings with the 1950s onwards with Britain and France too, which supplied it nuclear materials, including heavy water. Its nuclear weapons are undeclared -- unlike those of the US, Russia, Britain, France, China, India, Pakistan or North Korea. Israel hasn't signed the NPT.

However, although dubious, Israel's record of clandestine nuclear collaborations, shady deals and complicity in other countries' weapons pursuits mirrors that of the other NWSs. They are all culpable of proliferation or violation of dual-use commitments.

India has had nuclear assistance from the US, UK, Canada, the USSR, China, Russia, even Norway. India built its first bomb on the basis of CIRUS, a reactor constructed with Canadian and US support.

India's 1974 explosion was called "peaceful" because India didn't want to be seen violating its professed commitment to nuclear disarmament or its "peaceful" use legal commitments to the US and Canada. It also lacked the stomach for more tests.

Pakistan has long received nuclear weap-

ons designs, from China. A.Q. Khan, who pilfered centrifuge designs from Europe, made dirty deals with North Korea, Libya and Iran, with the Pakistani army's complicity. Washington ignored Islamabad's nuclear preparations during Afghanistan's Soviet occupation. North Korea made its bomb with a Soviet-built reactor.

The point is, all NWSs have been complicit in nuclear proliferation. Worse, they are the only nations to have used nuclear weapons and practised nuclear blackmail. So, their blackballing of Iran is hypocritical. Nuclear weapons are unacceptably dangerous in anybody's hands.

Although NWSs rationalise nuclear weapons via "deterrence," they have doctrines for actually using them against non-combatant civilians. Deterrence entails the readiness to use them.

The US and USSR came close to using nuclear weapons during the Cold War; Israel in 1973; and Pakistan and India during the 1999 Kargil conflict and the 10 month-long standoff in 2001.

No government committed to exterminating millions of civilians is "responsible." The current hype about "terrorist groups" acquiring nuclear material serves to legitimise the NWSs' possession of them and to fraudulently distinguish between "responsible" and "irresponsible" actors.

"Responsible NWSs" is a contradiction in terms. The greatest nuclear danger emanates from the NWSs, which seek security through nuclear terror. Non-state actors like al-Qaeda cannot build the elaborate relatively sophisticated infrastructure that nuclear programs need. They have even failed to clandestinely buy fissile material.

Yet, so long as nuclear weapons exist and are regarded as a currency of power, state and non-state actors will be tempted to acquire them. The only way of preventing them is to eliminate nuclear weapons globally.

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