

## Formation of taskforce welcome

*It must produce results, help raise safety standards of Dhaka city*

IT is welcome news that the government has decided to form two task forces: the first one will deal with the problem of highly combustible chemicals being stored in residential buildings, particularly in old Dhaka, while the second taskforce will handle the issue of illegally built high-rises which pose a grave threat to city dwellers.

The Nimtoli tragedy has laid bare the harsh truth that certain parts of the city have buildings and structures that should have been demolished a long ago. Apart from being dilapidated, these buildings do not have minimum facilities to protect the residents against fire and other hazards. Unfortunately, many of the buildings in new Dhaka are also a source of great worry. Safety regulations incorporated in the Building Code were overlooked for cutting costs and the owners were oblivious of the danger associated with building high-rises in an unplanned way. Furthermore, substandard materials were used which weakened the structures to the point where some of them are now caving in.

There is no doubt that the owners and all others involved in construction of such buildings are to be blamed and brought to justice for violating the rules. But can we condone Rajuk officials in charge of approving plans and supervising the construction process? After all, these buildings were not constructed in a week or month. Where were those officials when the owners were engaged in illegal construction of buildings? Their fault seems to be fundamental.

The government has rightly decided to form the task forces. However, the government should make their terms of reference and the progress they make from time to time known to the public. It must also ensure that the job of identifying weak structures and preventing storing of dangerous substances in residential areas do not turn out to be a long drawn out affair. The task forces must also guard against the initiative losing steam well before the target is achieved, as it will have to cross certain hurdles. Such apprehensions are not baseless, given the fact that many such good moves produced no results in the past, because they were not pursued to their logical conclusion. The problems returned with a vengeance.

The task forces have to be duly empowered to attain their goals. A host of legal questions might arise. However, people must be made to understand that nothing is more precious than human life and also that it is suicidal to stay in a structure that may collapse any time. Similarly, there should be a total ban on keeping combustible chemicals in densely populated areas. It is more than a question of enforcing the law; it is a matter of saving human lives threatened by hazardous, irresponsible practices.

## Power of information

*A tool for disaster preparedness*

A tale of power of knowledge and information has emerged from a village in Kutubdia where the people used their knowledge about the Right to Information Act to ensure accountability in the activities of local elected representatives, particularly in terms of pre-disaster risk reduction strategy. The encouraging facts motivated experts to call for formulation of policies focusing on pre-disaster risk reduction interventions instead of the current practice of post-disaster response and recovery method. Undoubtedly, advance preparations and sustainable planning can help reduce the impacts of natural and manmade hazards. One benchmark of good governance of the local government empowering the communities and ensuring participation of community members in disaster preparedness and management.

In another tale of success and empowerment, as reported in this daily on Monday, villagers of Kaulia in Morelganj, Bagherhat, have constructed a cyclone shelter in their village to protect them from natural calamities. It is claimed to be the first cyclone shelter in the village built by the community members with their own hand and on their own land. The community members, from about 277 families, raised money for its registration as public property and negotiated with the local government for the construction of a better road leading up to the cyclone shelter. The story only reinforces our belief in what people can do once they get united and motivated to solve their own problems. The above two stories have been revealed in a seminar titled 'Good governance in disaster risk reduction: Story telling' organised by Bangladesh Disaster Preparedness Centre (BDPC) in the city on Sunday.

All over the world communities living in disaster-prone areas build some mechanism to educate community members about how to minimize risks in case of a natural calamity, like cyclone, flashflood or landslide following heavy rain. In recent decades, community radio has been playing a vital role in keeping the people informed about looming dangers. Operated locally by some community members, these radios impart forecasts regarding rain, floods, cyclones, draughts etc.

Bangladesh being a disaster-prone land, authorities concerned will have to implement a fool-proof mechanism to make the vulnerable communities aware of natural disasters. In this connection, the scope and reach of community radios among the disaster-prone population will have to be increased at the earliest possible time as it is the fastest medium to disseminate information.



Evidence of the laxity in Rajuk and DCC.



## Tale of Rajuk and DCC men

So, you see, it is the officials and clerks and peons and drivers in DCC and Rajuk who continue to call the shots there. Just go on making them happy and they will look the other way as you go about doing all sorts of illegal things. Nothing can stop them. No law can touch them. No political party can uproot them.

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IF you go to any DCC office to apply for a trade license the grim and grave looking men there will give you a long list of "rules and regulations." The list would say you cannot set up a trading office in a residential area; you cannot set up a manufacturing factory in a residential area; you cannot use any room in a residential area to store chemicals of any description, and so forth.

Sounds very good, indeed. You are impressed. How thoughtful of the DCC! You will step out of the "sacred precincts" of the DCC and then look around. Lo and behold! You will wonder aloud what those shops, plastic factories, metal factories, glass factories, food factories, garment factories and engineering workshops doing in Nawabpur, Islampur, Lalbagh, Azimpur, Wari, Tipu Sultan Road, Narinda, Gandaria, Dhanmondi, Kalabagan, Rayer Bazar, Mohammadpur, Mogh Bazar, Rampura, Banani, Gulshan and Uttara! You will scratch your head and contemplate: Aren't they supposed to be residential areas?

The law-abiding citizen that you are, you will look for a place in a non-residential

area to set up your business and accordingly you will apply to DCC for a trade license. The clerks will look more grim and grave this time, as you did not insert plenty of 500 taka notes inside the envelope. They will now want to see the rent receipt to be sure that you have paid the rent. Next day you go there again with the receipts and this time the "dutiful" clerks will ask for the original deed of the building to make sure that the owner is the real owner of the building. With your head hung between your shoulders you will come out.

The building owner will get mad and ask you to go away. After pleading for a week he will give a photocopy of the deed and ask one of his sons to accompany you. But the dutiful clerks would not budge an inch. Original deed they want. Your ordeal might ultimately end when you will be able to go to a minister through the father of your brother-in-law's friend. By the time you get the trade license you will have lost all interest in doing business in Bangladesh. You will look for ways to go to a foreign country. Any place on earth.

The law-abiding citizen that you are, you will "acquire" similar experience in Rajuk,

if you plan to go the "legal way" to construct a house. The common dialogues are: "Get this paper. Get that paper. Let us see your soil test result. Let us see your plan. Let us see the report of the structural engineer. You shall report at every stage of construction and we shall inspect and give the required clearance. These are the rules and regulations, you understand, and no one can bypass them, you know, we are very strict." You are impressed.

After one year, you will remember the exact number of steps on the stairs that take one to the top floor of Rajuk building. You will know the name of every peon of Rajuk and the names of their villages. You will suddenly notice the silver hairs, which were not there one year back. You will notice the wrinkles on your forehead that have become permanent. Your building plan has not been passed yet.

But, you will not have to go through any of the above rigmarole if you would not be so adamant about being a law-abiding citizen. There are ways to bend laws, rules and regulations, and those "dutiful" clerks and their bosses at DCC and Rajuk would show you the ways. In fact, they would feel much obliged if you would give them the opportunity to "serve" you. They are there to help you, you know? The evidences of their "selfless services" are there all across the city's residential areas.

Rent a room in a residential building and set up your factory or chemical store. Go to the DCC with wads of cash and you will get your trade license. Every year the inspector will come to your factory for "inspection."

Order for biriyani and some cold drinks. He will go back to office a happy man with more wads of cash. And you will continue doing whatever you do in the factory until the day your family is burnt to death in a fire originating from that same factory. It is no more an apprehension. We have seen it happen its most brutal force the other day.

Buy a piece of land on a recently filled-up water body and get in touch with an "experienced" rajmistiry (mason). He will tell you not to bother about Rajuk, as he knew a peon there who is a distant cousin. He will get the plan "passed" by the officials...pay the right amount. They would not even come to inspect the site. The mason will give you the estimate and you will be amazed at how low it is. You had no idea one could construct a 5-storied house for a couple of lacs only!

So, you see, it is the officials and clerks and peons and drivers in DCC and Rajuk who continue to call the shots there. Just go on making them happy and they will look the other way as you go about doing all sorts of illegal things. Nothing can stop them. No law can touch them. No political party can uproot them. All the deep-throated hoomki and dhomki you hear from the ministers will vanish after a week and half. And DCC and Rajuk will be the same again. And we shall see many more buildings collapsing and many fire taking lives in residential areas. So, dear readers save your tears.

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## Facebook furore

Facebook has a lot of social utilities, including connecting people with friends and others who live around them. Bangladesh also has a huge opportunity to use it as a means for development, as has been done in India. Blocking of this site brought no benefit for the government as the determined users discovered ways to circumvent the blockade.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

HAPPILY, Facebook is back after a brief blockade that evoked criticism both at home and abroad. In an indiscreet decision the government blocked access to Facebook, a popular social networking site, because of posting of some anti-religious and porn links by users across the world. But the decision came after the arrest of a youth for uploading satiric images of the prime minister and the leader of the opposition.

The blocking of Facebook raised some questions as the reason that prompted the authority to block the site, inconveniencing thousands of users, was quite flimsy. There are many ways to work in these hi-tech days, which one can take advantage of to indulge in activities that militate against social norms.

The sacrilege committed by some global users through posting a few pages in Facebook, might have caused offence to religious sentiment, and the government sought to protest it openly. But the ostensible reason for blocking Facebook was the caricatures of the prime minister and the leader of the opposition posted on it. The person who drew the caricatures should be dealt with in accordance with the law, but there is no point in victimising all the users.

Innumerable images of former US president George W. Bush, with ridiculous exaggeration of his role in the Iraq invasion, were posted on Facebook when he was in power, but the US government did not block the site.

The crime of a single person or a group of

people is not a strong ground for blocking Facebook, which is used by nearly one million people in the country. Surely, most of these users belong to the segment of population who are likely to be the driving force for any future program leading to Digital Bangladesh.

Facebook is a social networking medium through which people, mostly the young, record their impressions and exchange views. It now has more than 400 million active users across the world, and is proving a vibrant forum for young and thinking participants. So, some basic principles are involved here as blocking of such site amounts to denial of freedom of expression.

It is incomprehensible as to why the government chose to block the entire site while there was option of complaining to the Facebook authority for immediate removal of any anti-social contents or to block individual profiles. Experience tells one that the temporary ban makes people more inquisitive about the contents, and they skirt around the restriction to view those more widely.

In an era of free flow of information and instant communication, one will surely appreciate appropriate action against those who abuse the facility. Allegations of Facebook being used to undermine reputations, particularly of young women, are being heard from different corners. A better step would be to take legal action against individual offenders. Collective punishment is an affront that goes against the principle of justice.

The government also blocked the video

sharing website YouTube in March last year for hosting a recorded conversation between the prime minister and army officers after the BDR carnage. The hosting of such a sensitive matter on any social network calls for stern action. However, taking action must not mean clamping a block on the entire site.

Pakistan's government ordered internet service providers to block Facebook on May -- 19 amid anger over a page that encourages users to post images of Prophet Mohammad (sm). The page on the social networking site has generated criticism in Pakistan and elsewhere because Islam prohibits any images of the prophet.

The government took action after a group of Islamic lawyers won a court order requiring officials to block Facebook. Besides Facebook, YouTube was also blocked in Pakistan for sacrilegious content. Pakistan can do it, but it need not be emulated, least of all through such an undemocratic action.

"India and Facebook is a match made in heaven," says a Daily Beast columnist. Facebook has over 200 million users in India, which has created a huge opportunity for growth. The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways and the International Road Federation (IRF) of India are planning to use social networking websites like Facebook, micro-blogging site Twitter and video sharing site YouTube to spread awareness about road safety and help reduce fatal accidents by 50% in the next three years.

Recently, the ministry and IRF launched a national campaign, "Reduction of Road Fatalities." According to a report on road safety by WHO, India tops the global list of deaths in road accidents with 125,000 fatalities and at least 2.2 million serious injuries each year. Delhi police are now using Facebook to address traffic problems.

Facebook users in India were greeted with a new message upon logging in. Facebook is now available in Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali, Telugu, Tamil and

Malayalam. Those languages have a combined 770 million speakers in India.

Privacy advocacy groups criticised recent Facebook innovations that had left customers data more exposed. The shift is an about-face for Facebook's brash 26-year-old founder Mark Zuckerberg, who has dismissed privacy as an old-fashioned social norm that is at odds with the ability to profit by giving advertisers and other companies more access to its customers' data and web habits.

In response to irate users and advocacy groups, Facebook authority recently announced that it has modified its privacy settings to make it easier for people to control who gets to see their personal information. Many people applaud Facebook for making the changes, though many feel it still has further to go to safeguard people's privacy.

The US is Facebook's largest market with more than 125 million users, but it is far from being the only country where Facebook is all the rage. According to the website checkbook, which tracks the company's growth, the UK is the second biggest market with more than 27 million users, followed by Indonesia with nearly 25 million.

Facebook has a lot of social utilities, including connecting people with friends and others who live around them. Bangladesh also has a huge opportunity to use it as a means for development, as has been done in India. Blocking of this site brought no benefit for the government as the determined users discovered ways to circumvent the blockade.

The injudicious action of the government did not only betray its democratic mindset but was also incompatible with its avowed aim of building a Digital Bangladesh. This Facebook furore was just a bit of fury ahead of the fledgling insurrection by the one million users in Bangladesh. Trying to ward off this reality can only be considered to be myopic.

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