

Deaths in landslide

A scientific approach to settlements in the hills needed

THE death of some 52 people as hundreds of tons of mud and rock fell on their houses in Cox's Bazar and Bandarban districts reminds us of similar deaths of hill dwellers in the past. We condole the deaths in the landslides and express our deepest sympathy to the bereaved families.

One may also recall that after the death of some 13 people in landslides at Teknaf in 2008, the upazila administration evacuated some 5,000 people from the hillside settlements and provided them with temporary shelters in different schools. But as no measures were taken for their rehabilitation, they again returned to the hills and settled there. Unfortunately, hill settlers, who are perennially exposed to the fury of the elements, are a forgotten lot and no permanent measures have ever been taken for their proper rehabilitation.

As it happened on the morning of Tuesday, the landslides usually occur mostly during torrential rains. But though they are aware of the danger, the hill settlers resign themselves to their fate, as they have few options open before them. And it is not that the administration is not aware of their precarious existence, either. But it is after each such disaster the administration swings into action, evacuate the victim families to some temporary shelters and then forget everything until the next calamity occurs.

The government should come out of this attitude of abandonment towards the hill settlers and find out a way of rehabilitating them under securer conditions. And before taking the move, it will be necessary to carry out a survey of the hills where people from the plain land have built their settlements and which of the places on the hills near such settlements are exposed to the danger of similar mudslides.

Landslides, albeit they are mainly natural in origin, have also many inducing factors behind them. One such factor is the illegal predatory habit of felling trees and cutting of earth from the hills. As a result, the soil of the hills is eroded, thereby loosening its capacity to hold on during heavy rains. As it happened last Tuesday, two days' torrential rain caused deadly mudslides and took their tolls. And it is this cumulative interference in the natural resources of the hill that we have been witness to their disastrous fallouts in the past and their repetition.

But what preventive measures are there to protect these hill settlers maintaining a precarious existence day in and day out? The first step would be to stop illegal settlements on the hillsides. Second, the spots on the hills where degeneration of soil capital have taken place and where cracks have developed should be identified through a study. Those risky spots have to be marked with appropriate signposts. And last but not least, the authorities should take a scientific approach about any settlement of people on the hillsides.

Government offices steeped in default culture

Who do we turn to for enforcing compliance?

THANKS to the parliamentary question-answer hour that can spill the beans from the closet of the high and mighty. Bravo, the post and telecommunications ministry and the questioner who asked to know about it, this has served a useful public purpose! It is now revealed that functionaries of all top government institutions, including president's and prime minister's offices, ministries, constitutional bodies and divisions -- 43 to be precise -- have all figured as telephone bill defaulters! They have appeared in a list furnished before the parliament, not excluding the postal and telecommunication ministry as well, the bill maker and collector itself. So pervasive and ingrained indeed has the government's culture of non-payment become, although allowances are generously provided for the purpose! The total defaulted amount involved is Taka 58.86 crore.

We have so far known MPs and ministers to be topping the list of telephone bill defaulters for years. But now the whole government machinery seems to have become accustomed to the culture. It has somehow sunk in the minds of people in government and authority that non-payment of utility bills is a de facto prerogative for them, a marker of high office setting them apart from ordinary citizens. But as public representatives are they not expected to lead by examples?

What moral authority the governments have had in demanding regular payment of bills from other citizens. When their own offices go defaulting on payments. Most importantly, such default means breaking budgetary discipline because it has to do with internal revenue collection and meeting the operating costs of the utility services. Supposing other people were to be provoked into the same culture by the default in the government sector, what would have been the state of the economy!

Indeed, this 'could care less' attitude within the government is a serious administrative slack, governance failure and a financial nightmare for the budget all combined into a growing menace. If the malady could be removed by public exposure of the lists it would have been long gone. Since that has not happened, we urge the government to take drastic measures to have all the bills paid through a mechanism that will also need to be sustained.

Developers should not go unchallenged

BEN hopes that the government will stand firm against the myopic demands of the developers and take strong action against those developers who violated the norms of behaviour at the meeting.

NAZRUL ISLAM

BANGLADESH Environment Network (BEN), the global network of non-resident Bangladeshis and their international friends, takes strong exception to and deplores strongly the way some real estate developers attacked the State Minister for Works, Mr. Abdul Mannan and Prof. Jamilur Chowdhury, the expert who was given the responsibility to review the Detail Area Plan (DAP) necessary for implementation of the Dhaka city Master Plan.

They made this attack publicly, in presence of journalists, in a recent meeting held in the secretariat. The developers are apparently upset by the proposed DAP aiming to retain 21% of the land as floodwater retention zones.

It is well known that many unscrupulous developers are capitalising on the housing demand by capturing wetlands in and around Dhaka city indiscriminately and promising housing construction on lands that are still under water. Yet, filling up of wetlands will leave no room for rain and floodwater, aggravating the water-logging problem that has already become serious in the city.

It is quite natural for these developers to oppose DAP, which preserves wetlands and restricts the space for their projects. However, the audacity they displayed in attacking the minister publicly, using unceremonious language, is unheard of. These people, some of whom have outstanding criminal cases against them, also had the audacity to question the

integrity of Prof. Jamilur Reza Chowdhury, who is well known for his independence and honesty.

BEN hopes that the government will stand firm against the myopic demands of the developers and take strong action against those developers who violated the norms of behaviour at the meeting. BEN also calls upon all the conscious citizens of the city and the country to thwart the machinations of the greedy developers.

Of course, the growing housing demand has to be met. However, this can be done by promoting decentralisation and vertical growth. Decentralisation will relieve the pressure on Dhaka city, and vertical growth will allow construction of dwellings while retaining space for passage of rain and flood water. The government also needs to switch from the Cordon Approach to the Open Approach to rivers, so that risk of flooding can be minimised and the problem of water-logging can be avoided.

While deploring the behaviour of many real estate developers, BEN agrees with one of their demands, which is that Rajuk should quit the business of development and instead focus only on planning and regulation. The current practice whereby Rajuk is both the regulator and developer involves conflict of interest. It is open to question whether Rajuk housing projects of Purbachal, Jhilmil, and Uttara Phase III are also not encroaching on wetlands.

Moreover, Rajuk projects are mostly a way of benefitting select members of the elite at the expense of taxpayers, whose



Filling up water bodies in blatant disregard of the rules.

money is spent on these projects, and at the cost of the poor people whose land is acquired for these projects. Enough of such grossly socially unfair projects!

The recent tragic fire in old Dhaka shows how enormous a task of planning and regulation Rajuk has on its hands, and how poorly it is performing that task.

The government should therefore take an immediate decision debarring Rajuk from further development activities and ordering it to focus fully on planning and regulation. Once this is done, Rajuk will occupy a higher moral ground to oppose the shameless developers who are willing to jeopardise the future of the entire city in order to enrich themselves.

While reformulating Rajuk's objec-

tives, BEN hopes that the government will take immediate action against the developers who threatened the minister. The stake is very high. The government has to protect its credibility and honour.

Taking this opportunity, BEN applauds State Minister Abdul Mannan, Prof. Jamilur Reza Chowdhury, Bapa, Bela, and all other organisations and individuals who are trying to have pro-environment DAP in order to save Dhaka city from impending calamity.

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Mix and match

The most important aspect of non-crop agriculture in Bangladesh is agro-processing activities. Of late, some private initiatives (steered by Pran Group) have turned to agro-processing, thus contributing to domestic employment generation, value addition and saving of foreign exchange.



Paddy should not monopolise.

ABDUL BAYES

IN his budget speech for 2010/11, the finance minister duly drove home his government's thoughts on agricultural development, especially food security. The last fiscal year saw some sea-changes in incentives for raising crop production (especially paddy). Special mention may be made of subsidy assistance cards for about 20 million farmers and distribution of Tk.720 crores as subsidy on diesel channelled through these cards.

We can also record serious efforts at boosting agricultural growth in the southern region, opening of an account with Tk.10 by framers, uninterrupted supply of inputs, and expansion of agricultural loans -- all being milestones for our agricultural sector.

Lifeline - livestock

I shall submit my personal views about the role of non-crop agriculture, particularly of agro-processing activities, in our national economy and the role that budgetary tools could play in that direction. It may be noted here that non-crop agricultural activities -- livestock, forestry and fish -- together account for roughly 9% of our GDP (livestock alone claiming one-third of that) and 15% of household income in rural areas.

More importantly, while the income

exchange. Researchers reckon that Bangladesh has huge potential for turning raw agricultural produce into refined ones through both forward and backward linkages.

If we want our agriculture to flourish and provide decent livelihoods to rural people, we shall have to take into cognisance agro-processing activities in right earnest. To use a simple example, the economy will benefit many-fold if tomato sauce can be produced domestically from tomatoes in farmers' fields. Thus, when we talk of employment generation in manufacturing industries we really indicate this type of industries.

And finally, allow me to use the metaphor of an American president epitomised as the classic argument for import substitution: if we buy a coat from England, we get the coat and England gets the money; if we buy the same coat from America, we get both the coat and the money.

Fruit juices

The budget has proposed new supplementary duty on juices, including mango juice. There was already a 10% VAT on the juice industry and now another 10% has been imposed as supplementary duty. Cumulatively, it will increase the price of juices by around 27%.

The price increase will cut in two ways; the income effect will reduce the demand as real purchasing power to cause demand to fall; and a substitution effect would result in substitution towards carbonated drinks that has witnessed no such increase in duty over the years, and which are considered to be detrimental to health.

Mango and other juices are in fact health foods fortified by Vitamin A and C supplements. They help to increase the nutrition intake of people of all ages. National nutrition intake has declined over the past few years due to decrease in purchasing capacity and non-availability of vitamin processed food. This is now available through fruit drinks, which are available even at the thana and union levels in rural Bangladesh.

As far as my knowledge goes, western countries do not add taxes on, or keep them at very nominal rate, all fruit consumables to keep them within the reach of the ordinary buyer. The fruit processing industry provides a huge stimulus to our agriculture and fruit horticulture by proving employment to millions of people at the fruit growth stage, supply distribution system and in the processing plants.

By and large, the fruit and juice industry is part of our agriculture-based economy, providing livelihood and employment to thousand of our farmers. Imposing disin-

centives might actually negate the government's commitment towards poverty reduction.

Milk and milk products

The duty on imported powdered milk has been reduced. The progressive decrease in the value of taxes (during the past three years) on imported dairy products is alleged to be directly hitting our milk industry, which is still far from meeting the domestic nutritional requirement. Customs duty on cheese and curd -- which are basically non-essential items -- is reported to have been reduced.

Again, withdrawal of tariff on yogurt drink, chocolate drink, mango milk/banana milk might impact upon organic drinks, thereby affecting nutrition and increasing unemployment. The proposed measures may make milk powder cheaper and thus harm the local milk growers and the milk supply chain -- all involving millions of small earners -- thereby affecting national milk production.

Milk production has already come down from a peak of 2.7 million tons in 2007/08 to 2.2 million tons in 2008/09, when there is a national demand of about 6 million tons. It may be mentioned here that FAO recommends per capita availability of milk at 150 mL, against Bangladesh's 50 mL only, which is one-thirds of the internationally recognised nutrition requirement.

In the outline of Vision 2021 huge emphasis has been laid on increasing livestock and milk production. That is the way that our farmers can move from subsistence to commercial agriculture. If that vision has to be realised, we have to see that our internal and external tax policies are in tune with the vision. Milk is the most essential nutrition supplement for the health of children, young, lactating mothers and even older people.

While every country tries to provide incentives to the milk industry, our proposed tax reduction on imported milk may militate against our own mission of providing milk to our children and generating employment in the economy. In this case, we can only recollect the famous statement of the American president that has been mentioned before.

With proper measures taken there is immense potential for further growth of the livestock sector beyond that of agricultural sectors, and particularly involving the smallholder village farmers. Encouraging national milk production and discouraging imported milk powder is the only way to make our agriculture-based economy more vibrant and cater to the growing requirement of national nutrition and health.

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