

Saving city's lifelines

Wetlands must be protected here and now

THE uncontrolled urban sprawl has already gobbled up the open spaces and the wetlands that once added to the beauty of the city and a breather for its inhabitants. It has also eaten up 47 canals that crisscrossed the length and breadth of city. As a consequence, we have now only 17 per cent of the metropolitan area as wetlands whereas in 1989 it was 29 per cent. And oddly enough, since 2000 when the Wetland Conservation Act was in place, the rate of decline in the wetlands has become even faster at 2000 hectares every year.

As a result of this loss of wetlands and destruction of the rivers surrounding the city, it is not only the ecological balance that has tilted precariously, the source of fresh surface water that replenishes the groundwater system is also dwindling very rapidly. And now that the city is dependent on the groundwater system for the supply of 87 per cent of its drinking water, one can easily visualise what is in store for its dwellers in the future, unless something is done immediately to arrest the destruction of the natural water bodies and marshlands still existing in and around the metropolitan area.

Considering the scale of devastation to its greenery and the natural watercourses that we have been witnessing since long, the prospect of Dhaka as a liveable city is also becoming bleaker day by day. But so far the authorities concerned have done precious little to put a brake on the disastrous trend.

The prime minister, the elected Members of Parliament (MPs), the relevant parliamentary bodies, even the judiciaries, the media and the civil society have expressed deep concern at the developments and directed all concerned to address the issue. But it all fell as if on deaf ears, while the wetlands continue to recede without letup.

Are we then to assume that the perpetrators of the damage are more powerful than the highly placed government people and the well-meaning quarters combined, or that there is no actual commitment on their part of those in authority to do the job?

In case they fail, the people will definitely lose whatever little confidence they still have in the system and its capability to govern, for fifty per cent of good governance consists in maintaining the trust of the people by doing things that need to be done. And anything to the contrary is tantamount to complete denudation of the authorities regarding its mandate to govern.

On this score, the attention is of necessity drawn to the capacity of the Rajdhani Unnayan Kprrtripakkha (Rajuk), whose job it is to regulate the city's process of urbanisation. Unfortunately, its urban planning cells are conspicuous by the absence of qualified urban planners, geographers and environmentalists in them. The capacity of Rajuk and of other such bodies should therefore be reorganised and strengthened on an urgent basis.

In the circumstances, the government needs to put its foot down in the matter in order to maintain public confidence through protecting the city's environmental lifelines and keeping it liveable.

US combat role ends in Iraq

Much now depends on how Baghdad copes

ENDING combat operations by American soldiers in Iraq has long been a plank of Barack Obama's political programme. Understandably, for one who was opposed to the war as a senator and who in fact voted against it, it was particularly painful to have to inherit the very conflict he thought was unnecessary when it began in 2003. Mr. Obama reminded the electorate in his campaign for the White House that he would end American involvement in Iraq as president. Now that American forces have officially gone ahead with the draw-down, it is important to assess what the impact of the US decision will likely be.

The first point to be borne in mind is that not all American soldiers will be going home. A fairly large number will stay back to assist the Iraqi armed forces in handling the very conflict the Americans have been dealing with. That brings one to the question of whether Iraq's soldiers in the army, crafted over the last few years under American supervision, will really be able to bring matters under their control. One might recall that a few weeks ago, a senior Iraqi general suggested that American forces stay back for the next ten years in order for Iraqi soldiers to get a full and good grasp on the situation. That suggestion was naturally ignored by the Obama administration.

The second point concerns the ability of Iraq's army to contain the insurgency, which all so often has been a serious challenge for American soldiers. In the past couple of weeks, explosions in Iraq have killed a number of people, raising questions of whether Iraq's army and other security forces will be able to cope with conditions. For Iraq's people, however, the departure of US troops is a sign that the country is back in their hands and that their government and their military are fully qualified to lead the country into a democratic era. It may sound like idealism, but it is there all the same.

One can only wish Iraq's people well. They have paid a high price since the unwarranted, illegal invasion of their country by US and British forces in 2003. The beautiful country they once inhabited is now a memory. We expect that Iraq's politicians will be able to forge a credible government, even though six months have gone by since the elections. Nuri al-Maliki should realise that trying to cling to power by keeping Iyad Allawi out can only undermine Iraq. Right now, it is stability the country needs. Operation New Dawn, as the Obama administration puts it, should lead to real, concrete results. If it does not, the consequences will be horrible.

The Teflon man

Trial or no trial, Hussein Muhammad Ershad is guilty on two counts. He seized the power of this country, less serious of his two offenses. More serious is how he popularised appeasement -- the seedbed of corruption in this country. He is a Teflon man.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IF a cat has nine lives, Hussein Muhammad Ershad has many more, because the former military dictator-cum-born-again-populist is back in the news. He has an enviable way of making it happen, perhaps the only living politician in this country who is comparable to Harry Houdini, the legendary magician, who specialised in tricks and escapes.

Ershad can be locked in handcuffs and leg-irons, and then nailed into a crate. The crate can be roped and weighed down with two hundred pounds of political embarrassment before being lowered into a lake of shame. Bet your money, he will escape sooner than you thought.

It is amazing how it has always worked in his favour, except for that one time when he had to land in jail. Remember 2006 when politicians from both sides of the political divide were courting him? Remember how the course of events precipitated over his participation in the

national election? Sixteen years after his ouster, he was still the main man in a political madness that brought another madness called One Eleven.

This one time Ershad is back as an anti-climax. The High Court has rendered the 7th amendment of the constitution, making his power grab illegal, an offense punishable by law that doesn't exist yet. This embarrassment comes when he is a part of the government and his brother is a cabinet minister. God works in mysterious ways. A blow from friends hurts more than ten from enemies. Touché!

Is Ershad going to stand in the dock for it? I do not think so. The great escape artist will prove again that no trap is hard for him to escape. He has friends in the right places and years of political plumbing has made him adept at digging out of any hole. Rest assured he is going to get out again.

The former strongman is likely to be in the news longer than he thought. The families of victims killed in mass uprising against him are planning to sue him.

Even the student leaders of the '90s movement are asking for his trial. If these things happen as and when they happen, I am convinced, as he must be, that the clamour is going to die down after sometime. In his life as a political turncoat, he has learned that there is nothing that can't be overcome given a little time and the short memory of our people.

So, Ershad is going to do it again. He is already saying that he has accepted the court verdict, claiming in the same breath that it is not sufficient to put him on trial. The parliament has to pass the law before the long hand of justice can touch him. And this is where he is comfortable. He knows there will be many a slip between the cup and the lip. He also knows it is easier said than done. Trying him is going to be a trying thing.

I say it because life never rights all the wrongs. Augusto Pinochet was put under house arrest fourteen years after he stepped down as president of Chile in 1990, the same year Ershad was toppled in this country. Pinochet had around 300 criminal charges pending against him, but he slipped the iron hand of justice when he died in 2006. Pol Pot, the Cambodian monster, died in his jungle hideout, before he could be captured and brought to justice. Adolf Hitler took his own life to escape the ordeals of trial and conviction.

Destiny, of course, has a hand in it,

and maturity is when one realises that life doesn't always balance its book. The killer of one human being is a murderer, few more is a serial killer, and many times more is a mass murderer. But a dictator is someone who has no limits. One estimate has it that the number of people killed or disappeared under Pinochet's watch ranged from 5,000 to 30,000. Hitler is responsible for 20-25 million deaths, Stalin for 20-60 million and Mao Zedong for 40-72 million.

In comparison, Ershad the autocrat was an angel. He is responsible only for a handful of deaths -- students who were crushed under a speeding truck and others cut down by bullets fired by his henchmen. He built many roads, raised many buildings, and composed many poems. He did all of these by appeasing anyone who wanted to oppose him.

Trial or no trial, Hussein Muhammad Ershad is guilty on two counts. He seized the power of this country, less serious of his two offenses. More serious is how he popularised appeasement -- the seedbed of corruption in this country. He is a Teflon man.

Nothing sticks to Teflon. No criticism sticks to Ershad. But the fact remains that he gave us enough rope so that we could hang ourselves.

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Cash-strapped US faces diminished political clout



Fewer dollars means weaker US?

With so much wealth destroyed and with the sharp downturn in production, the direct, short-term economic consequences for the world of the September 15, 2008, events have already been severe. The indirect geopolitical consequences could, over the long run, turn out to be even worse.

MICHAEL MANDELBAUM

THIS month marks the second anniversary of September 15, 2008, a date that will be remembered as one of the worst moments in the history of the global economy. On that day US investment bank Lehman Brothers collapsed, triggering a major financial crisis and dramatically worsening a worldwide recession whose effects are still being felt.

The date also matters in the history of international politics, accelerating what is destined to be the most important international political trend of the second decade of the 21st century; the growing financial obligations of the United States government. Coping with these obligations will limit the resources available for American foreign policy, thereby reducing the nation's international role.

Because that role is so important, the United States acts as the world's de facto government, providing to other countries many of the services that governments typically furnish to the societies they govern, this will have a major, and in all likelihood dangerous, impact both on the global economy and on international politics. That impact is the subject of my new book, *The Frugal Superpower: America's Global Leadership in a Cash-Strapped World*.

In the years leading up to the Lehman collapse, the United States substantially increased its national debt. To cope with

resort, on which other countries can rely to buy the products they make for export.

Another major international economic role is still intact, but because of mounting national debt, looks increasingly shaky: The dollar remains the world's principal currency, but as much because of the lack of a viable substitute as because of affirmative global confidence in American economic dependability. That confidence is beginning to waver. The long-term continuation of the special status of the American currency in world markets is not assured.

As for international politics and international security, some tasks that the United States has carried out will almost certainly be eliminated. The use of American military forces to protect people persecuted by their own governments, which the United States undertook in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia and Kosovo, will not be repeated. Nor will the strenuous military effort to foster political stability and democracy in which the American government is engaged in Afghanistan and Iraq be launched elsewhere or even continued in those countries for much longer.

The deterioration of the US fiscal condition will also affect the American defence budget. By one estimate, the US accounts for about 45% of the world's military expenditures. Pressure to reduce these expenditures will increase over time, which will, in turn, affect the rest of the world because most defence spending supports missions that are of major importance to global security. Specifically, the personnel and weaponry paid for by the defence budget make a US military presence possible in three crucial regions -- East Asia, Europe and the Middle East.

In the first two regions, that presence helps keep order by serving as a buffer between and among countries that are not actually hostile to one another but that harbour fears that hostility might someday

arise. The American security role in Europe reassures the Western Europeans that if Russia should attempt to intimidate them, the United States will protect them as it did during the Cold War. At the same time, the American military presence in Europe and the enduring alliance with Germany reassure Russia that Germany itself, which invaded Russia twice in the first half of the 20th century, will not become an aggressive military power again.

The similar US role in East Asia reassures the countries there that they have a means of counterbalancing China, while reassuring China that Japan, like Germany an American ally and one that invaded and occupied the Chinese mainland in the 20th century, will not reprise its past pattern of conquest.

The American military presence in both regions, although reduced from Cold War levels, enables the countries in each to feel that their region is safe and that they can behave accordingly, just as a policeman on patrol imparts a sense of security to a neighbourhood. Any draw down of US forces in Asia will add to the nervousness of the countries of the region, which face an increasingly powerful and assertive China.

In the Middle East, American military power serves to contain Iran, whose government is deeply and openly committed to, and works actively for, overturning the existing political and economic arrangements in the region. An American military presence in some form will be necessary to deter Iran as long as the clerical regime holds power in that country, a presence that will be all the more urgently needed if that regime succeeds in its efforts to acquire nuclear weapons.

Growing US debt, and the measures necessary to cope with it, will make it more difficult to sustain American military deployments in each of these regions, and a substantial reduction of American forces in any of them could well have adverse political and economic consequences.

An American withdrawal from East Asia or Europe could produce heightened suspicion, perhaps leading to arms races among the countries of these regions, which would threaten trade and investment in both. A diminished American presence in the Middle East could trigger a regional war, which would threaten the availability of its oil, on which the global economy depends.

In short, the impact on all countries, not only the United States, of the growing financial obligations of the American government could be serious indeed, especially since no other country or group of countries is willing or able to do what the United States does around the world.

With so much wealth destroyed and with the sharp downturn in production, the direct, short-term economic consequences for the world of the September 15, 2008, events have already been severe. The indirect geopolitical consequences could, over the long run, turn out to be even worse.

Michael Mandelbaum is the Christian A. Herter Professor of American Foreign Policy at The Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. This essay is adapted from his new book, *The Frugal Superpower: America's Global Leadership in a Cash-Strapped Era*, published by PublicAffairs.

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