

## The colliding trains in Narsingdi

Signal and communications systems need immediate updating

THE head-on collision of two trains, the Mahanagar Godhuli and Chattala Express, in Narsingdi on Wednesday raises the question of how safe railway services are in Bangladesh. There is a particular reason why such a question comes up, given that the general feeling has been that compared to other means of public travel, such as bus and launch services, railway journeys have been looked upon as relatively secure. The accident rate in the case of the railways is lower than that in the case of bus and launch journeys. But, of course, we do realise that accidents do happen all the time and in every area. The idea remains, though, that there ought to be as few of them as possible.

Where the tragic happening in Narsingdi is concerned, there are serious reasons to think that it did not have to happen. For one thing, trains follow a set route which again is guided in technologically detailed and safe manner. For another, those who operate trains are expected to be alert to the utmost not just about ensuring the safety of passengers but also about being careful in preventing mishaps to those not on the train as it rushes on. Which brings up the question of how these two trains in Narsingdi ended up on the same tracks and simply thudded into each other. As an electrician of the Chattala Express notes, this train was not supposed to be on track-1 but on track-2. If that is so, there is here a clear case of negligence of duty on the part of those who man the signals system. As we understand it, the railway authorities themselves suspect that wrong signalling may have caused the accident. That is only too obvious, since it is not logically possible for two trains to be on the same track and move toward each other. Just how much of a responsibility the railway people bear for the tragedy is to be noted in the allegations made by some local people. They have alleged that the employees of the local railway station simply deserted their posts immediately after the accident occurred.

There is a clear need for a thorough, purposeful inquiry into the accident. The four-member inquiry committee formed by Bangladesh Railway must get to the root of the matter. To our dismay, however, we note that no inquiry report on accidents or indeed on any other matter has in the past ever been made public. Neither have any individuals responsible for accidents and the like have been held to account so far. It is time we broke with this reprehensible tradition or track record. Let the inquiry into the Narsingdi accident be a departure from the norm.

We are constrained to say that the time has arrived for the country's railways to be modernized and brought in line with railway services in other parts of the world, especially in our neighbourhood. An installation of up-to-date signalling and tracking systems is a dire necessity. In circumstances where three major train accidents have already occurred this year, these measures become a necessity. And let us not forget that in the last nine years, for all the relative safety of train journeys, 5,050 railway accidents have taken place in Bangladesh. Those figures should have been an eye-opener for Bangladesh Railway long before the Narsingdi tragedy.

We express our condolences to the bereaved families of those who have died in the accident. As for those who have been injured, let the authorities come forward with the assistance they will certainly need for treatment.

## Saving electricity important

Change in habit as well as modern approach needed

AT a moment that the country is facing a crisis of energy and power, it is needless to emphasise that the issue of controlling wastage of power should be one of our main concerns. In this perspective, introduction of the 'National Electricity Week' which is being observed since December 7 marks the date of commemoration of Dhaka's getting its first power connection about a century and a decade ago (1901). This is undoubtedly a very inspiring idea. But the quality of being novel and at the same time inspiring is one thing, while getting the people habituated to saving electricity is another.

A report on the back page of the December 9 issue of this paper provides a glaring example of how an extravagantly illuminated high-rise building flies in the face of the Electricity Week when it is still under observance.

It is a matter to be researched by social psychologists as to why people can be so casual about the need to save electricity in a country so ridden by power crisis. The department that looks after power, needs to lay added stress on creating the necessary condition so that consumers may find it more gainful to save power in stead of wasting it with gay abandon.

Since consumers would be more responsive to measures that would help them save cost on utilities, the authorities would do well to introduce a system by which they would be able to buy the power they like to use for regular consumption or for a special purpose in advance. And for special use of power for any larger private or social occasion, they may get the prior permission for such use from an appropriate authority and buy the needed power in advance accordingly. The existence of such systems will help the consumers to save as well as supply them with the options to choose between various packages of power available at the supplier's end. On the other hand, the authorities concerned would know in advance the amount of power to be made available in the national grid to match consumers' need.

The prevailing regime of power is inherently susceptible to corruption and misuse. The leakages will not stop, but portend to grow bigger even after more power is added to the grid, as the finance minister has assured. To reverse the harmful trend of misuse and pilferage of power, the government should therefore think of adopting modern management and distribution tools for ensuring sustainable use of power.



SHAFIQ ISLAM DRINKNEWS

## The Norad response came late

The Norwegian response does not appear to be enough. Its matter-of-fact clarification came late in the day and doesn't explain why it couldn't promptly come up with an answer already given twelve years ago. Its minister could check on records facts and tell facts to BBC instead of speaking from the high moral ground.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

YIPPIE! Norad has spoken at last. Last Wednesday, late in the afternoon Bangladesh time, it released a statement that should clear the smog of doubts hanging over Grameen Bank and Muhammad Yunus. The Norwegian aid agency has confirmed that there was no embezzlement done by the poor man's banker and his bank, although Grameen Bank did transfer Norwegian fund to Grameen Kallyan, "breaching agreement."

The question is why did Norad take so long? Why did it wait until the news spread like a forest fire and speculations ran amok whether some kind of misappropriation could have indeed happened? And the same Norwegian minister, Erik Solheim, who is quoted in the clarification statement, told BBC few days earlier that it was "totally unacceptable that aid is used for other purposes than intended."

It is still difficult to understand what

was the purpose of the investigative TV documentary *Fanget I Mikrogjeld* (caught in micro debt) to mention an irregularity that was already regularised after a baby born at the time of occurrence grew up to be twelve. The Norad statement claims that the report raised the question of where the Norwegian aid money had gone. In a higher democracy like Norway, people and press have the right to hold their government accountable for every single krone spent.

The television documentary was clear on what it meant. It talked about how Grameen Bank borrowers were sinking deeper in debt and in the same breath also mentioned the "unauthorized" transfer of Norad money to a sister concern as a statement of fact.

But what the documentary did with that inference is ludicrous by all accounts. It could have been more explicit in its presentation. It could have stated in clear terms that there was no embezzlement or even avoided the mention of an irrelevant piece of information

unless the intention was to create hype. By the time Norad opened its mouth, the scandal had grown arms and legs.

For many of us it came as a shock. Not that we believed everything that was said, but the doubt had definitely raised its ugly head in our minds. For a while, it convinced us that after 170 years Honore de Balzac could be right once again, that behind every fortune there could be a crime. It was more shocking to see how quickly everything looked yellow to jaundiced eyes. Faster than light, the presumptuous scandal smudged our impression of a man like the ominous scratch on a brand new car.

For that the blame definitely goes to the Norwegians. They obfuscated the world and then took their time before coming forward with a clarification. By then our own government, forget rest of the world, was convinced that there was fat in the fire. The prime minister hurred innuendos at the Grameen Bank founder and vowed to hold an investigation over the allegation against him. Earlier, the general secretary of her party had said Bangladesh Bank was going to conduct an investigation.

Another senior leader of the party went one notch up. He indicted Muhammad Yunus as the "most corrupt" man, supposedly in the country (?). The secretary of the ruling party's student arm was even more ludicrous. He fancied that the Nobel Laureate should be

stripped of his title. Hobbling for a middle ground, the finance minister managed to say nothing was wrong with the fund transfer since it was already resolved between two sides.

In hindsight, it looks like one of the sides, the Norwegians, had accepted that resolution with a grudge. Because, neither the Norwegian government nor its embassy in Bangladesh nor Norad stepped up to the plate to defuse the crisis until two days ago. The Norwegian response should have come sooner preferably when the documentary was being made.

Meanwhile, our government has led itself into an offside trap. Its jejune response to the allegation showed the reflex of a restless ambush as if it was waiting for an opportune moment to strike back. In so much as the government was free to hold an inquiry, it made the whole thing sound like an inquest.

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## Cutting off the nose

My great regret is that sometimes we as a nation fail to rise above personal and partisan politics, and yield to resentment of greatness in others. We fail to recognise people's dedication to a cause of greater good and service to humanity, and attribute personal motivation to their causes to denigrate or belittle their success.

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

CUTTING off the nose to spite the face is an age old adage to describe an action out of pique. Albeit metaphorical, this defines a desperate act that would damage oneself more than the source of one's anger. I do not know why, but I am attracted to this proverb by the surreal controversy raised at the highest level of our country over an unproven charge of funds embezzlement against an individual who is an icon of pride and achievement for a nation otherwise known for poverty. Truly, I find no answer for this behavior among us unless we accept another expression that some people run after a kite to retrieve a headgear without checking their heads first.

Since the early days of our painful birth as a sovereign country, we have been known internationally as a basket case, as a country swimming in an ocean of poverty and battling often the scourges of nature in the shape of flood, hurricanes, and famines. Our nation had become a poster child of extreme penury, abject malnutrition, and breeding ground of diseases of epidemic proportion. With an ever expanding population

squeezed in a tiny area, we had the label of the most densely populated place on earth. The international community looked upon us with great pity, and the foreign press took pains to describe our misery in bold letters whenever a disaster struck our hapless country.

For a long time our only recognition in the international community was for natural disasters and great poverty. For a great number of years we survived on aids and charity from the richer countries. For a long time every dollar that we spent on our development program, eighty cents came from foreign assistance. Foreign relief and foreign aid were a major source of our income. Our people who made a living abroad hung their heads low; they had little to be proud of except their own labor.

It took a generation for us when we found a home grown institution and its founder who gave to the world a new image for the country. An image that celebrated the painstaking work of a soul dedicated to bring an alternative solution to end the cycle of poverty. This was Grameen Bank and its visionary founder Prof. Mohammed Yunus who showed the country and the World at large an innova-

tive way to empower multitude of powerless people to lift themselves from the morass of deprivation and penury without losing their dignity. Grameen Bank proved that there were ways to put to productive use massive amount of human resources, particularly women and the unemployed, that otherwise go in waste.

Years before Mohammed Yunus would be honored by the Nobel Institute Bangladesh became an icon of hope for the impoverished nations of the world with his novel concept of micro-lending. This ground breaking approach would be accepted as a model for bringing economic growth and empowerment of the poor in both developing and developed world. No one ever thought that a model that was born in a remote village of Chittagong would one day be emulated in the outskirts of Chicago or in the slums of New York. Today there are now 141 Grameen replication projects in 38 countries. It has succeeded because the concept has created an effective and sustainable response to world poverty. Thanks to Grameen Bank and Prof. Yunus the concept of microcredit is a highly accepted approach toward eradication of poverty around the globe.

I do not want this to be a litany of praises either for Prof. Yunus or his pioneering ways. This is redundant. Grameen Bank and its founder became household names nationally and internationally by what they have achieved; they do not need any propaganda. In a landmark departure from traditions, the Nobel Institute awarded the peace prize on an individual who did not dazzle the world with political wizardry, but with a

radical idea that the poor can be trusted with fiscal responsibility. In an editorial note, the Financial Times observed (October 14, 2006) that in awarding the Peace Prize to Prof. Yunus, "the Nobel Committee has shown imagination by recognizing three agendas that support peace: ending poverty, empowering women, and emphasizing the importance of trust in human relations".

My great regret is that sometimes we as a nation fail to rise above personal and partisan politics, and yield to resentment of greatness in others. We fail to recognise people's dedication to a cause of greater good and service to humanity, and attribute personal motivation to their causes to denigrate or belittle their success. In our tunnel vision we fail to see the paths these gifted individuals have lighted all round, and the people they have helped along the way. Our personal differences sometimes make us blind to the honor and pride these great individuals bring to the country, and hopes they create for the future generations.

I am confident in time this momentary distraction will also pass. This controversy will be resolved. The Norwegian government has already shown the first step. It is now up to others who we trust as leaders to remove this controversy. We need to show that we are all behind a name and an institution the world has accepted as icons of poverty alleviation. Else, we will all prove to be undeserving of the adulation we have so far received from the international community.

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