

HC action on illegal housing projects

Swift implementation and monitoring are an imperative

THE High Court move on Monday directing the government and other authorities to take action against unauthorized advertisements, earth-filling and sale of plots in and around the capital is of critical importance, seeing that it comes against the backdrop of a similar directive in July last year. The earlier directive had asked the authorities to prevent any such earth filling, advertisements and plot sales by unauthorized and unapproved housing projects. This latest directive, coming in the wake of a petition filed by the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA), is unfortunately proof that there are elements ready and willing even to flout the decisions of the higher judiciary. It should have been for the relevant agencies to identify the unauthorized housing projects and go for decisive action against them. That they did not is regrettable.

We understand that when a petition was filed against unapproved housing projects and their advertising campaigns and other activities last year, as many as 56 unauthorised projects were mentioned by those filing the petition. But despite the HC orders issued at the time, private housing firms went on with their advertisement programmes and have indeed been luring people into reserving or buying plots of land whose legality is clearly in question. It is a matter that the Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha should have handled swiftly. It did not do that. Moreover, despite its claim that it cancelled the registration of some firms, it did not take legal action against the guilty. And here arises the issue of what the authorities have not done to ensure a full implementation of the law, framed in 2000, to protect wetlands, parks and open spaces. The law stipulated a fine of a mere Tk. 50,000 and imprisonment of five years for an individual violating it. To date, though, not a single individual or firm has been penalized although the fact remains that the law has been violated with impunity. For their part, housing projects complain that the law does not specifically list the kind of areas where they can work in. The result is that while some projects have been approved, alongside them some unapproved ones have come up as well. The loopholes and the ambiguity in the law in question are therefore a contributory factor to the mess.

We believe that the latest HC move must be acted upon immediately. While there is a freeze on the activities of the illegal housing projects, it is also important that those behind such deals be prosecuted swiftly. It must also be ensured that those who may have been swindled into purchasing such unauthorized plots of land have their money returned to them. At the same time, it is an absolute necessity for a monitoring of not only the implementation of the law enacted in 2000 but also the latest HC directive. Rajuk can do the monitoring, but since it is limited in terms of its manpower and necessary paraphernalia, it is important that the government bring in other agencies to assist in the process.

Finally, we feel it is imperative for the authorities to let the nation know how it means to recover those wetlands and open spaces that have already been filled in. In these eleven years, the culprits have done their work. Will they be allowed to get away with their dark deeds?

CNG auto service woes

It is still a messy affair

IT is extremely frustrating to learn that, despite several attempts by the authorities concerned to install meters on the CNG 3-wheelers and secure compliance by the drivers they remain as defiant as ever. The last attempt to introduce meter too has met with little success, to put it politely. All this, because of the arbitrariness of the auto drivers and owners, let alone, enforcement failure.

In every city of the world taxis are the only mode of transport after public buses. But in our case, the picture is more or less the opposite. The availability of the cabs is scarce and the city buses are always full to the edge making it difficult for majority of the commuters to board those. Taxis as a mode of transport has virtually failed us. Short of it, the CNG driven 3-wheelers could fill the void provided, its fare did not skyrocket and the drivers not being whimsical in denying passengers the service at their sweet will. Instead of being expedient, the 3-wheelers have turned out to be fleecing machines.

Following the replacement of environmentally hazardous 2-stroke engines driven autos by 4 stroke engine years ago, with meters installed in them, the latter have been tampered with.

The reluctance to accept metered fares continues to this day. For instance, in the latest case of upward revision of fares with mandatory meter installation this has run into difficulties.

The crux of the matter is that with each increase in fare the owners inflate the deposit rate. As a result, the benefit that is aimed to accrue to the drivers does not land in their pocket. Consequently they charge more from the commuters. In other words, the passengers are sandwiched between the owner's appetite for profit and the drivers' exploitation of fare increase to their advantage.

Let the stake holders be brought into an interface with each other under the supervision of the Transport Ministry and a cost effective as well as consumer friendly and remunerative formula be arrived at for all concerned.

Time for cabinet reshuffle

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THE cabinet is in serious need of a reshuffle. There are a couple of reasons why changes need to be brought into the government as it now happens to be. In the first place, a reshuffle is a normal political course pursued by democratic governments in order to convince people that dynamism remains a key factor in governance. In the second, now that the Awami League is in its third year in office, it is of critical importance that some ministers in key places be either shifted elsewhere or dropped altogether.

The difficulty with government is that without periodic changes in the ministerial structure, political administration turns into atrophy. And atrophy soon gives out every sign of descending into fatigue in government. A fatigued government loses the will to forge ahead and the intention of holding on to dynamism.

This question of a reshuffle must begin with the matter of the various advisors attached to the prime minister at this point. In a parliamentary system of government, advisors of the sort that we now have operating, often to the chagrin of ministers, are a misnomer. In these two years, the precise definition of the responsibilities of prime ministerial advisors has not been explained to the country. More to the point, the presence of advisors when there is a cabinet functioning under the constitution becomes a superfluous affair.

Of course the prime minister can have advisors, but not of the kind who will be entrusted with the task of overseeing the work of the ministries. There are the ministers to do that job. What the head of government can do is to have advisors attached to the Prime Minister's Office in the way the prime ministers of India and Britain have advisors. In Delhi and London, advisors have not been tasked with looking into the ministries. And ministers have never shared power with them.

The conclusion? The prime minister should be doing away with her advisors. And do not forget that when the people of this country elected a government two years ago, they were not voting for a government that would brim over with advisors. It will be pointless suggesting that advisors and ministers have their separate functions, that they do not come into conflict. There is always a



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superfluity and an irrelevance about advisors. Besides, in resource-poor Bangladesh, the less government you have, the better for all of us. Let the trimming begin, through sending the advisors home. Which brings us to the matter of the reshuffle of the cabinet. And which of our ministers have been doing well? Let us count the names.

By any measure, Motia Chowdhury has done a superb job at agriculture. Her professional, no-nonsense approach has kept the ministry on its toes and given it the kind of dynamism that is the hallmark of good government. Chowdhury needs to move on to a new ministry because she has done well at agriculture. If P. Chidambaram can step

out of finance and into home in India, Motia Chowdhury can do a similar feat in Bangladesh.

Food Minister Abdur Razzaq too has performed well. In a political climate where more politics and less administration is what ministers have traditionally indulged in over the years, Razzaq has kept his pulse on his portfolio. But, of course, this year looks pretty threatening where foodgrains production and supply are concerned. It is important that Razzaq be kept on.

These past two years are a pointer to the probability of the forthcoming three being handled well by the minister. At finance, A.M.A. Muhiith has done a reasonably good job. It is difficult to predict

Window of opportunity

HARUN UR RASHID

BHUTAN lies to the north of Bangladesh and is separated by 30 km of Indian territory.

It was the second country to recognise Bangladesh. In early 1973, formal diplomatic ties between the two countries were established.

In January 1980, Bangladesh opened its diplomatic mission in Bhutan, which was headed by a resident ambassador. Likewise, Bhutan reciprocated the diplomatic gesture by appointing an ambassador to Bangladesh in the same year.

As early as April 1972, both countries had expressed their desire to establish close relations. The first official commercial contact between Bhutan and Bangladesh began in late '70s, and in 1978 a Bangladesh trade delegation paid a visit to Bhutan to discuss the prospect of trade between the two countries. A Trade Agreement was concluded in September, 1980.

The four-day visit to Bangladesh of Bhutan's Prime Minister Lyonchen Jigme Yoser Thinley is significant in many ways. It has reiterated the bonds of friends and cooperation to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Furthermore, it underscores that the two countries can embark on collaboration in new areas, besides both countries can make this part of South Asia into an economic hub of activities through regional interconnectivity and hydropower cooperation.

The Bhutanese premier led a 20-member delegation, including the health minister, cabinet secretary and foreign secretary. Six members of Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industry accompanied Thinley.

It is noted that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited Bhutan in November 2009, which was her first to any Saarc country after her assumption of office as the head of the government, reflecting

the importance Bangladesh has always attached to relations with Bhutan.

On January 11, Thinley addressed a seminar on "Gross National Happiness" at Dhaka University. He explained the country's adherence to the concept of gross national happiness (GNH) as a priority rather than judging the success of the state by the use of Western economic metrics.

Based on Buddhist principles, the Bhutanese version of GNH emphasises "a set of social and economic interventions that evaluate social change in terms of the collective happiness of people."

The GNH concept is now firmly entrenched in Bhutan's national policies, with four main objectives -- investing in people, living in harmony with tradition and nature, effective and good governance; and developing a dynamic economy -- as the foundations for a vibrant democracy.

The Bhutanese prime minister visited the Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forests in the world, as well as Chittagong and Cox's Bazar. He also visited a Buddhist temple in Cox's Bazar. The people of Bangladesh deeply appreciated the Bhutanese prime minister's vote for the Sundarbans to be included one of the modern Seven Wonders of the World.

During the Bhutanese prime minister's visit, two agreements were signed -- an agreement on cultural exchange and a Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in the health sector.

Under the cultural agreement,

including development of tourism, the two countries can work together to have a package trip for international visitors to visit Bhutan and Bangladesh. The hills and pristine greenery of Bhutan and the mangrove forests of the Sundarbans in Bangladesh and the beaches embracing the Bay of Bengal could attract tourists to see both sides of natural beauty.

In terms of the health care agreement, Bhutan plans to recruit about 30 doctors -- both specialists and general with five years experience -- on yearly basis for the next three years.

Prime Minister Thinley reiterated that his country would extend cooperation to meet the power deficit of Bangladesh (Bhutan has the potential to produce 30,000MW, which it has initiated to develop its potential).

Thinley said that Bhutan could take advantage of Bangladesh's human resources -- professionals, skilled and semi-skilled people -- to develop its infrastructure, industries and information technology.

The Bangladesh prime minister said that connectivity between Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, North Eastern India, Myanmar, China and Thailand to South East Asia holds immense opportunities in economic and trade areas.

The prime minister also said that a separate exercise was also underway to bring all issues related to transit and connectivity within a single framework to present a clear picture of opportuni-

ties. who can replace him if and when a reshuffle comes to pass. Education Minister Nurul Islam's competence has been demonstrated without question. He needs to stay where he is, in the nation's interest.

At the foreign office, it is a mixed bag on offer. On the one hand, Foreign Minister Dipu Moni has injected a noticeable degree of energy in a propagation of Bangladesh's diplomacy abroad. On the other, the nation's diplomatic missions abroad have curiously been unable to replicate this energy in the way they have worked.

Most missions remain overstaffed, to a point where diplomats simply appear to be on three or four-year holidays abroad. There is an absolute need for a cutback in employee and officer numbers at the missions. As for the foreign minister, she could certainly do with a drastic curtailment of travels abroad. If the minister has to go everywhere, why have ambassadors and high commissioners at all?

There are then the ministries where new faces are somewhat a necessity, considering that those holding sway there have put in a far from satisfactory performance. The home ministry needs a change, both at the minister and minister of state level. The same applies to the ministry of commerce, which under the present minister has precious little to show for achievement, particularly in the region of prices.

The country is in need of a new communications minister, one who can do the job without raising the sort of questions generally raised by parliamentary standing committees about irregularities in the working of the ministries. A change is also a requirement at the shipping ministry as well as the overseas employment ministry. Ministers with a hands-on approach are an imperative there.

Finally, there are the ministries, now in the hands of the prime minister, that the head of government can give over to others. And let there be a break with tradition in the matter of defence. How about A.K. Khondokar or someone else taking over as minister of defence?

And, yes, it is time men like Tofail Ahmed, Abdur Razzaque, Suranjit Sengupta and Major (ret'd) Rafiqul Islam were called back to take charge of some key ministries.

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Thinley thanked the Bangladesh government for the offer to use Chittagong and Mongla ports. The use of the ports would yield huge savings for Bhutan and it is reported that India agreed that Bhutan could use its territory for transit to Bangladesh.

On trade, the two countries have enormous opportunities and the bilateral trade could be raised to \$100 million from the current figure of \$30 million.

Bangladesh imports from Bhutan include boulders, dolomite, gypsum, dust coal, slate, graphite, timber and fruit products (jelly and jam), and exports to Bhutan include consumer goods, pharmaceuticals, jute products, newsprint, chemicals, detergents and light machinery.

Bhutan's Seed Corporation signed an agreement in February 2000 with Brac in Bangladesh to supply onion and radish seeds.

Both nations are members of Saarc and are keen to develop the regional forum into a dynamic and vibrant one. Both countries are Least-Developed Countries and have a common approach to economic related policies in the multinational forums. Both joined the Non-Aligned Movement in 1973. Both are parties to the 1970 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Bhutan Airlines operate between the two countries and people-to-people contact has increased considerably.

Bangladesh and Bhutan can complement as well as supplement each other's development efforts with diverse resources and potentials to inject further dynamism in many thrust sectors. Exchange of fresh ideas and common aspirations coupled with conclusion of agreements characterised the visit of the Bhutanese prime minister, who is also the Saarc Chairman.

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