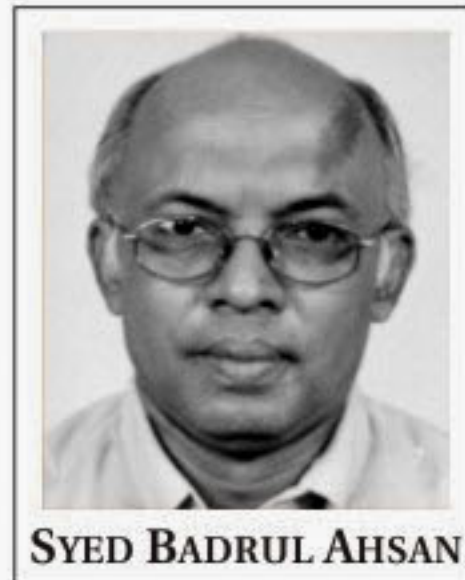


GROUND REALITIES

Dissent ... and arrogance of power



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

HASAN Mah mud is in little mood to give any space to critics of all the wrongs happening in the ship-breaking

industry. And that is troubling. The minister of state for the environment ought to have given all the criticism lately leveled at his ministry on environmental matters some serious thought.

We are not very sure whether the state minister, who earlier was briefly in the same position at the Foreign Office, did spend time on mulling over the public concerns that have been raised over the hazards posed by ship-breaking in Bangladesh. The environment question is there; and then again there is the matter of the health of those who are employed in the industry. These worries have in recent times been articulated by social, legal and human rights groups, and for all the right reasons.

The minister of state does not, of course, see matters that way. He takes one look at these people raising all this commotion over the ship-breaking issue and decides that an evil genie with foreign links today stalks the corridors of the judiciary. These people who demand an end to ship-breaking are, in effect, agents of foreign nations. And there you have it, this quick propensity on the part of the powers that be to tar anyone and anything they do not approve of with the pitch black taint of treason.

It takes you back to the days of Pakistan, when illegitimate military regimes as well as self-professed politicians would not permit you the liberty of dissent. A struggle for democracy was a conspiracy to destabilise the country; a call for regional autonomy was a deep-rooted plan, in cahoots with foreign powers, to

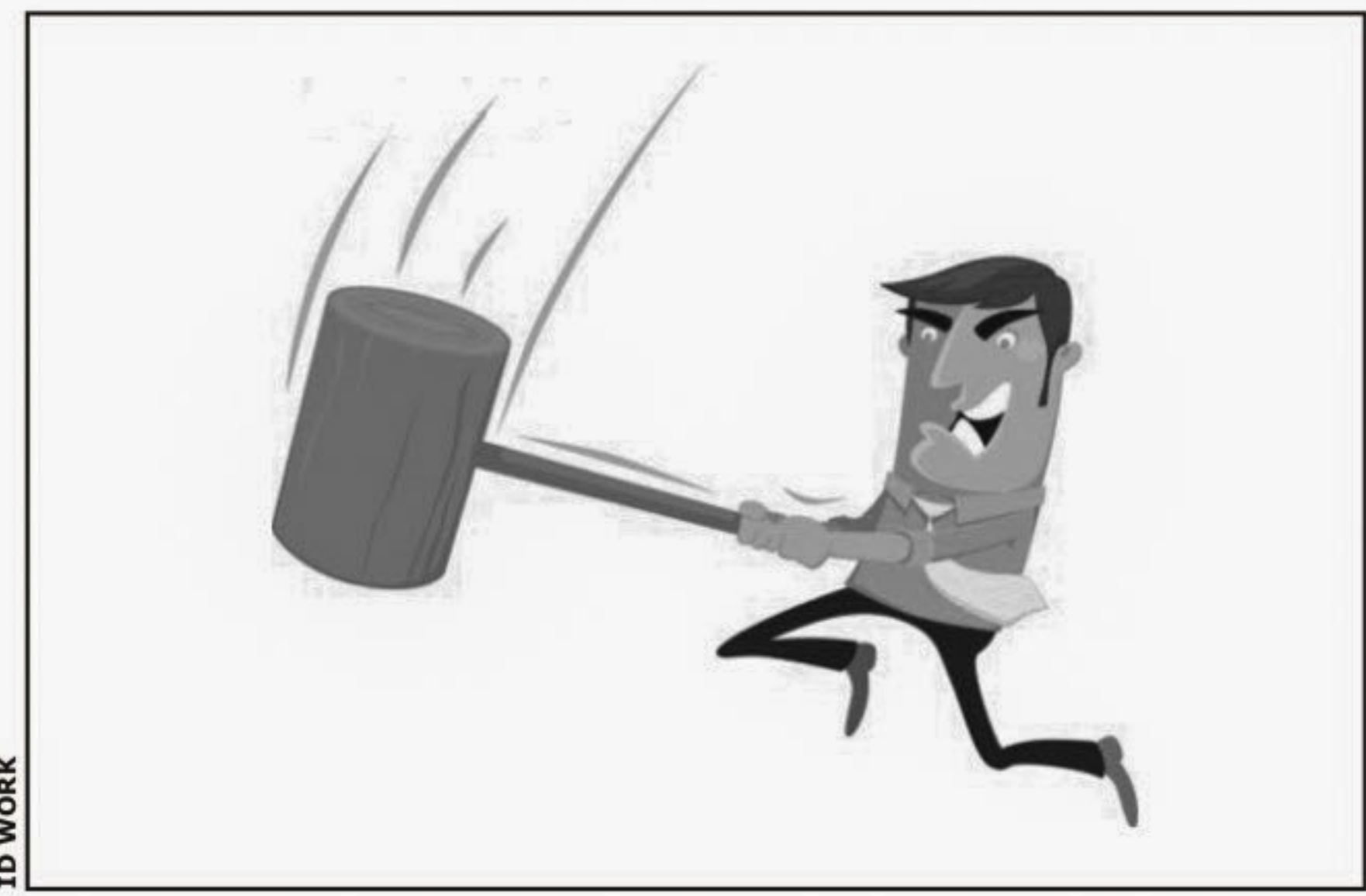
undermine the integrity and solidarity of Pakistan.

It is that old genie of suspicion and arrogance of power that has stayed on in Bangladesh despite our much celebrated and much remembered break with Pakistan in 1971. Those who have felt offended by the politics of the Awami League have swiftly gone into the odious job of spotting a collusion between it and India. These days you will bump into pseudo-politicians forever coming up against the spectre of Baksal every time they have to explain why they are staying away from parliament. What should have been an academic debate on the state of politics in Bangladesh rapidly and almost always descends into the ugly and the bizarre.

The tragic part of the story is that even the Awami League, now that it is in power again, has decided that the other point of view is undeserving of consideration and so must not be heard. Think of the uproar over the plans for a new airport. The people of Munshiganj, for that is where the government plans to build the airport, have demonstrated unambiguous dissent: they do not want that airport. Why should their point of view be ignored? More pertinently, what cosmic reason has suddenly manifested itself to inform us that life without a new airport will lead to hell on earth for us?

The Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA) has been doing a creditable job in raising public concern over matters that the government would like to ride roughshod over. Are we now being told that BELA is an agent of foreign powers? Must we always let individuals, no matter how omnipotent they think they are, get away with all the aspersions they cast on citizens' patriotism?

In the civilised countries of the world, you could get into serious trouble if you seek to quash dissent. You would be sued if you made insinuations over the loyalties of citizens



When you try to stamp out dissent, you are really coming between the light of the sun and the fledgling plant that is democracy.

to the state. Which leads us to the question: what happens if a citizen or a clutch of citizens decides to haul some powerful people to court on charges of questioning the patriotism of a man or woman?

No, sir! There must always come a degree of decency into our perceptions of dissent. When Transparency International Bangladesh emerges with some harsh truths, with findings relating to corruption in the various public sectors, an entire government machinery goes into action to clobber TIB into submission.

TIB tells you of corruption among the police. For the government and especially for the police, the job then ought to have been to undertake a serious review of the way the police department works. That did not happen. What did happen, when it happened, disappointed the country: the home minister questioned the credibility of the TIB report and senior police officials suggested darkly that the survey had been based on interviews with drug addicts. It was politics below the belt. It did not remain

politics any longer.

This culture of treating dissent as an irritation at best and treachery at worst keeps democracy in a state of the wobbly. For years governments have been particularly harsh on some non-government organisations. Why are the NGOs there? Because government does not and will not do what it has been elected to do. Why do Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Ain-O-Salish Kendra keep up the refrain of extra-judicial killings in Bangladesh? Because these killings happen and are happening. Why must the minister for home go into denial mode and tell us these organisations are not giving us the truth?

When you treat the other person's point of view with disdain, your exercise of power turns erratic and irresponsible. When you try to stamp out dissent, you are really coming between the light of the sun and the fledgling plant that is democracy.

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Turmoil at Munshiganj

Expect judicious decision from PM

THE eruption of violence in Munshiganj that left one police officer dead and scores injured is saddening. We condemn this wanton violence. We condole the death of the police officer who was on duty and express our sympathy to the bereaved family and those who received injuries. We also commend the police who showed impressive restraint even when one of their officers was killed.

Why this uproar and reaction of the people of Arial Beel? It is a move to voice a grievance over the airport project by people who felt wronged. We are not aware of any feasibility study carried out on the surroundings of the site or the site itself. Studies on seasonal water catchment and flows, impact on fishing, the forest land, the cultivable lands and uppermost the effects on livelihood should precede any action on the ground. It is a mega project set to run for a long time. Therefore, the stakes are very high for the people, let alone the government.

We appeal to the government to take the people in confidence and dialogue with them about the reasons for selection of such a site. It is imprudent to expect cooperation of people who believe that they are being robbed of their hearths and homes and means of livelihood. Application of force is not the way.

The government should not put any label on the issue to politicize it. It should not tag any political party to the violence. This will cloud its vision and blur its understanding of where it hurts the people.

Reportedly, the PM will decide on the matter shortly. We urge her to take all factors into account -- technical, financial, environmental and especially those that affect the livelihoods of people who currently occupy the area before making up her mind. In making her decision public opinion must figure high. She must not also allow either pride or party interest to cloud her judgment.

Sthamba project committee

Members deserved respect

THE departure of six experts from the committee handling the Shwadinota Sthamba project is not only regrettable but a huge embarrassment, for the government and for the country. The embarrassment comes through the experts' decision to quit being a fall-out of certain irresponsible remarks made by the minister of state for liberation war affairs to a newspaper more than a week ago. We fully understand the sentiments of the experts, all of whom are highly respected individuals in society. For the minister to suggest that work on the project is being held up owing to the ego of these experts is actually to look away from the reality. He would have done better had he examined the bureaucratic reasons behind the delay in project implementation.

Work on the Shwadinota Sthamba at Suhrawardy Uddyan has already been much delayed. Our suggestion is that a specific time table be set for its completion. Meanwhile, the real reasons why it has been proceeding at a slow pace must be identified by the minister of state. Obviously, the departure of the six experts is a blow that has hit the government badly. It should also be regarded as a message to the government, which is that eminent citizens whose services are sought by the state must be treated with the dignity they deserve. Minister of State Tajul Islam has neither denied nor expressed regrets over his remarks. He calls the whole episode a misunderstanding. If it was, it turned out to be rather costly.

The government owes the nation an explanation on the matter. It is inconceivable that men like Jamilur Reza Chowdhury, Muntassir Mamoon, Hashem Khan, Shamsul Wares, Rabiul Husain and Mubashhar Hasan should be treated in such despicable manner. Damage

BOTTOM LINE

Tunisia and domino effect



HARUN UR RASHID

THE sudden fall of Tunisian President Ben Ali, who had been a dictator for 23 years, sent waves of protests

against the authoritarian regimes through the Arab world, where autocratic leaders preside over similarly repressive governments.

Unemployment, poverty, disparity of income among rich and poor as well as deficit in democracy are the principal sources of frustration among common people.

Egypt is the largest Muslim Arab country with 80 million people. 90% are Muslims. The youths have led the revolt. That the youths overcame the fear factor in protesting against the president is a psychologically important fact.

Since January 25, anti-government protests have been intensifying across Egypt, as police clash with demonstrators in several cities demanding the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak (82). Hundreds of judges joined the protests in Cairo.

Reports say that Egyptian opposition figure Mohamed ElBaradei, former Director General of IAEA, said that President Hosni Mubarak must go, and added that the president "did not understand the message of the Egyptian people." Earlier, he was soaked by water cannon and surrounded by police as he joined protesters on the streets of Cairo.

A protester in Suez was killed in clashes with police, witnesses said. In Cairo, police used tear gas and water cannon to disperse the crowds, who responded by throwing stones. Live TV pictures from Cairo showed what appeared to be army vehicles on the streets.

In one location, an army vehicle appeared to go into reverse when it was surrounded by protesters who

raised their fists in celebration. Internet and phone services -- both mobile and landline -- have been severely disrupted, although protesters are using proxies to work around the restrictions.

Reuter said that protesters had also gathered outside al-Azhar mosque, and near one of the presidential residences in the capital.

In Alexandria, it is reported that the protest turned into a block-by-block battle and then, almost incredibly, a more than two-hour pitched street battle ended with protesters and police officers shaking hands and sharing water bottles on the same street.

On January 30, despite curfew, tens of thousands of protesters gathered at the Tahrir (Liberation) Square in Cairo and the army did nothing to

demonstrators also criticised the Obama administration's response to the tumult in Egypt. They waved Egyptian flags and held signs that read "Obama: Democracy or Hypocrisy?" and "Victory to the Egyptian People!"

President Mubarak addressed the nation and said that he had asked the government to resign. He later appointed intelligence chief Omar Suleiman as vice-president for the first time. The president firmly said that he would not allow the country to be destabilised. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabian King lent his support to President Mubarak.

President Barack Obama issued a plea for restraint in Egypt after meeting with national security aides to assess the Cairo government's response to the widespread protests

In Yemen, Mauritania and Jordan, thousands gathered against the governments, venting their anger at rising prices, unemployment and lack of voice in government.

hold them back. Rather protesters climbed on to the armoured vehicles, and in one footage an army officer was shown being carried aloft by protesters because of his support.

The French government said it had received reports that four French journalists covering the protests in Cairo had been arrested. They were later released.

It is reported that 160 people have been killed and 4,000 injured -- as of January 30 -- since the protests against unemployment, corruption and rising prices began. Thousands of people have been reportedly arrested.

In New York, Cambridge, Mass., and Washington, protesters took to the streets demanding that Mubarak step down.

Outside the Egyptian Embassy, a few miles from the White House,

that are threatening the stability of the country.

After speaking to Mubarak by telephone on January 28, President Obama delivered a four minute statement calling on the Egyptian leader to take steps to democratise his government and refrain from using violence against his people. The US president called on the Egyptian authorities not to use violence against the political protests, driving home his message in a reportedly 30-minute call with the Egyptian president.

President Obama has been acutely conscious to avoid any perception that the US has been quietly engineering the ouster of a major ally in the Middle East. The US Secretary of State called for an "orderly transition."

Egypt is one of the largest recipi-

ents of US aid, receiving \$1.3 billion annually in military assistance alone, because it has been a pillar of US foreign policy in a volatile region, and because the US particularly fears a government dominated by Muslim Brotherhood, which may not honour the 1979 Peace Treaty with Israel.

Key allies Britain and Germany expressed concern about the violence, with Britain saying the protesters had "legitimate grievances."

Analysts say that the Egyptian leadership sees the protest as being similar to the events of 1977 when Anwar Sadat, the then president, announced plans to end subsidies on basic food items, setting off 36 hours of rioting. They see a repeat of the threat from Islamic militants in the 1990s, which the government was able to suppress.

Observers say that the leaders have fallen back on a familiar strategy -- dispatching security forces, blaming Islamists and saying that the protesters were driven by economic and not political concerns.

It seems that it is now a battle of will between the protesters and the government. One party has to concede because the country cannot afford the continuing turmoil. Stock prices have dropped and places of tourism have been closed, because of which the economy of the country will suffer heavily. The US, Turkey and India have sent planes to evacuate their citizens.

It is important to see whether the Egyptian military has an exit strategy for the president. Some suggested negotiations with the leaders of protesters. The appointment of a vice-president after 30 years may indicate that President Mubarak is seriously thinking of a successor.

In Yemen, Mauritania and Jordan, thousands gathered against the governments, venting their anger at rising prices, unemployment and lack of voice in government.

The author is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

1509

The Battle of Diu takes place near Diu, India, between Portugal and Turkey. Also known as the Second Battle of Chaul, the conflict centered on gaining control over the Indian Ocean to route trade down the Cape of Good Hope, previously controlled by the Arabs and the Venetians.

1943

Germans surrender at Stalingrad, Russia, announcing the final defeat of the German 6th Army. The declaration brings to an end 5 months of bloodshed.

1966

Pakistan suggests a six-point agenda with Kashmir after the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965; the Second Kashmir War fought over 5 weeks causing thousands of casualties.

1989

The last Soviet armoured column leaves Kabul after a nine-year conflict where Soviet Union supported the Marxist-Leninist government of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan at their own request against the Mujahideen Resistance.

1990

The President of South Africa De Klerk lifts the 30-year ban on leading anti-apartheid group the African National Congress. He also commits to release jailed ANC leader Nelson Mandela.