

Sordid tale of a lake

We need some answers

EVERY good action is rendered meaningless unless its effects are constantly monitored and guarantees are in place about follow-up measures needing to be taken. That, however, does not seem to be happening in a whole lot of areas in this country. One has only to go back to the three front-page pictures of the Suvadda lake in Keraniganj appearing in Thursday's issue of this newspaper. Like so many other water bodies and other public places that have gone clean out of public hands through encroachment of various sorts, this lake was a source of worry for citizens back in 2005. It was so because a dumping of waste and rubbish had as good as caused the death of the lake.

But then something of a cheering note happened nearly three years later. In June 2008, environmentalists in particular and citizens in general celebrated the revival of the lake, an achievement brought about through the efforts of the caretaker government then in office. It was the public expectation that thenceforth the lake would flow uninterrupted and to the satisfaction of the residents of the area. That, unfortunately, was not to be. Observe the third picture this newspaper printed yesterday. The old dismal scene of garbage clogging the lake is back in place. The desolation we thought had gone for good three years ago has returned and the authorities are blissfully unaware of what has happened.

Our question now is simple: if this is the fate befalling Suvadda lake, are we to suppose that whatever public resources or property have so far been retrieved from individuals and groups of insidious intent will go back to square one? Given the indifference of the authorities, they may and perhaps they will. Even so, may we ask those authorities why they have been remiss in doing their job and what they mean to do now that they have been shamed publicly? We wait for answers.

Highway safety concern

Take WHO report seriously

RISING toll of fatalities due to road mishaps has impelled the world Health Organisation (WHO) to launch a road safety programme- internationally. Admittedly, Bangladesh's highways are highly accident-prone with a casualty figure at 5, 000 annually according to the government estimate. But the figure provided by the WHO is three to four times higher. The gap in figures is attributable to the fact that many fatal road accidents often go unreported.

Ours are among the most accident-prone highways in the world. And the death toll on the roads beats the fatalities from malaria. Now that the issue has caught a UN body's attention, it is expected that the government would draw on its programme to enhance public awareness about road safety as well as take effective measures to reduce the growing number of deaths on highways.

Before addressing the concern, the first step would be to identify the primary causes of fatal accidents. The WHO has focussed more on the physical flaws in infrastructures. The roads and highways with their inherent construction defects, narrow width and too many twists and turns are undoubtedly a major source of accidents. Redesigning and reconstructing the defective roads with the help of UN programme will contribute significantly towards ensuring road safety. At the same time, raising the awareness level of the road users, especially of the drivers, passengers and pedestrians is also a major area of concern. Skill of the drivers and condition of the vehicles running on the roads also demand serious attention given that there are many inexperienced drivers with fake licences and unfit transports.

Costs of treating and rehabilitating the seriously injured victims are an issue. Damage to property, lost output, medical and human costs eat up around 1.5 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), according a government estimate. The cumulative impact of the road mishaps makes it a very vital area of national concern and must be

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

May 13

- 1648**
Construction of the Red Fort at Delhi is completed.
- 1804**
Forces sent by Yusuf Karamanli of Tripoli to retake Derne from the Americans attack the city.
- 1880**
In Menlo Park, New Jersey, Thomas Edison performs the first test of his electric railway.
- 1940**
World War II: Germany's conquest of France begins as the German army crosses the Meuse. Winston Churchill makes his "blood, toil, tears, and sweat" speech to the House of Commons.
- 1941**
World War II: Yugoslav royal colonel Dragoljub Mihailović starts fighting with German occupation troops, beginning the Serbian resistance.
- 1943**
World War II: German Afrika Korps and Italian troops in North Africa surrender to Allied forces.
- 1948**
Arab-Israeli War: the Kfar Etzion massacre is committed by Arab irregulars, the day before the declaration of independence of the state of Israel on May 14.

CROSS TALK

Osama the man, Osama the myth



MOHAMMAD
BADRUL AHSAN

OSAMA bin Laden is dead. No, this is no more a breaking news, but a stupefying enunciation that the most wanted man in the world is wanted no more. He has been laid to rest many leagues under the North Sea, bundled in burial shroud and plopped hurriedly and hissing into water like burning charcoal. The peace-loving world is relieved that the most notorious terrorist is dead.

But there is certainly something odd about the rush of it. If the Iranians are claiming that they have evidence Osama bin Laden was already dead two good years ago, others are also having similar doubts. The United States simply killed its Enemy Number One for whom it has been ransacking two countries for the last ten years, waging a war against terror 24/7 all over the world and having its citizens and visitors confined to a prison of paranoia. Then they buried that man in some distant sea, all in a day's work.

All that time, for the last five years, when the United States was hunting for Osama bin Laden, he was hiding in a house located in a Pakistani garrison town. Then one fine midnight US forces arrived in two Chinook helicopters that compromised the Pakistani radar system. They exchanged firefight with the world's most elusive fugitive, killed him and then quickly buried him at sea. In a nutshell, Osama's death comes as a riddle inside an enigma wrapped in a mystery.

If we take those five years of Osama's life, he, who had a \$50 million prize on his head, lived and died in obscurity. It was an antithesis to his reputation as the archangel of anarchy, whose name was flashing on televisions and newspapers across the world every day for last ten years, whose moves were being watched by every intelligence apparatus in the world as millions of passengers were walking through scanners at every airport in every country and millions of Muslims were being scrutinised and frisked as perennial suspects of



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being potential terrorists.

It was odder than odd that while the entire world was looking for him, Osama bin Laden was living like a family man with his three wives and children right under the nose of the Pakistan government and its intelligence machinery. But even if we choose to ignore that elemental fact of missing links, Osama's death has an element of disbelief.

Why did he have to be killed and buried in such a hurry? Why was it conducted like a ceremony, which has skipped its essential steps? Osama bin Laden should have been captured alive or wounded. He should have been tortured and interrogated. His confessions by the hour should have made headline news for many days. I don't know about the Americans, but as a Muslim who has been a collateral damage of 9/11, I would have liked to hear the man tell us why he had indeed planned that attack on the American soil.

Much to my dismay and that of many others around the world,

Osama's death came as a tight knot on a loose noose. Perhaps the Americans had taken out their anger on another man already. They went to Iraq on Osama's heels and made a public spectacle of hanging Saddam Hussein. They captured the Iraqi dictator, held his trial televised to every corner of the world, and then hanged him on the auspicious morning of an Eid day. The Americans have exacted their full revenge on Sancho Panza and spared Don Quixote.

They have taken their precautions. They have buried him at the sea to prevent his grave from becoming a shrine. How far that is going to work remains to be seen. Che Guevara was buried in an unmarked grave in the Bolivian jungle but his stylised image has been transformed into a world-wide emblem celebrated till today.

This is where the Americans might be proved wrong. Modern-day shrines are not necessarily built on the ground. They can be on t-shirts, coffee mugs, computer screens, car

stickers, decals, mobile phone screens, etc. They can certainly be built in peoples' imagination, in the secret vaults of their hearts and minds. Who knows, someday even the house in Abbottabad might turn into a holy site for Osama devotees!

Because, the Americans have failed to separate the man from his myth. Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper said in his reaction: "Canada receives the news of the death of Osama Bin Laden with sober satisfaction. Sadly, others will take his place." It was important to liquidate the man, but more important to antiquate his philosophy.

Unless resolved that a victorious Islam doesn't require a defeated America, or a defeated America doesn't progress Islam, Osama will remain a dead man fighting, leading his army even from the depth of his watery grave.

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The Kings we crown

MARK MOYAR

UNTIL very recently, no one would have predicted that Barack Obama would be forcing foreign leaders from power with greater regularity than George W. Bush. The president maintains that the United States is not playing kingmaker, but is merely enabling people to choose their leaders. But history indicates that the president's choice of a provisional leader may have a much greater impact on a country's political future than the desires of its people.

Nowadays, US has great influence when it comes to selecting who rules between the collapse of an authoritarian regime and the holding of elections. American support put Mohamed Hussein Tantawi in charge of Egypt's provisional government in February. Libya's National Transitional Council and Yemeni Vice President Abd al-Rab Mansur al-Hadi are most likely next.

Unfortunately, we have repeatedly ruined transitions to democracy by backing provisional leaders who broke promises to govern virtuously and instead focused on staying in power and silencing their political opponents.

Isaias Afwerki, whom Washington endorsed as head of Eritrea's provisional government in 1991, went on to stifle dissent and obstruct democracy with such efficiency that he remains in power 20 years later. In 1999, the West supported Hashim Thaci as interim head of an autonomous Kosovo, only to watch him engage in ethnic cleansing and exploit his newfound power and pres-

tige to win election as prime minister in 2008.

The Iraqi election of 2005 brought to power Ibrahim al-Jaafari, who combined ineptitude in governance with brutal persecution of Sunnis. His behaviour proved so harmful that the

months because he could not match the political and military strength of the Bolsheviks. After the 1979 Iranian revolution, the provisional government of Mehdi Bazargan--which the Carter administration supported in place of the shah--lasted nine months

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Bush administration pushed him out. And the countries that anointed Hamid Karzai head of a provisional Afghan government in 2001 now deplore his 10-year-old regime for electoral fraud and corruption.

The danger of a perpetual provisional government has already surfaced in Egypt. Last week, protesters demanded the resignation of Tantawi, their onetime ally, after he rounded up political dissenters. The same danger lurks in Yemen with al-Hadi, who spent decades as a senior aide to an authoritarian ruler.

Transitions from authoritarianism to democracy also fail regularly because the provisional leadership lacks the will or ability to protect itself from enemies inside or outside the government.

In 1917, Russia's provisional leader, Aleksandr Kerensky, fell in four

before Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini forced Bazargan's resignation.

How can we avoid these pitfalls? For starters, we can spend more time researching prospective candidates. We embraced Thaci, who, European investigators now say, headed a criminal organisation that murdered Serbs and harvested their organs.

In Iraq, we empowered Ahmad Chalabi, despite his conviction for embezzling millions of dollars in Jordan. US policymakers and diplomats must also avoid giving preference to intellectuals, technocrats and opposition politicians. We tend to favour those who wax eloquent about democracy and moderation, hold advanced degrees and speak English. But these traits are usually irrelevant, or worse.

Many unsuccessful provisional leaders--like Karzai, Bazargan and a

variety of Iraqi--sposessed all these traits. Grand in vision, they lacked the organisational ability and force of personality to translate ideas into reality. Preferring conciliation to confrontation in dealing with opponents, they were undermined or thrown out by men more devious and ruthless than them.

Mahmoud Jibril, the leader of the National Transitional Council of Libya, bears a disturbing resemblance to those failed leaders. An intellectual technocrat, he holds an American doctorate and has written several books, but he has not shown an ability to manage or lead. Meanwhile, charismatic Islamic radicals are gathering supporters in the rebel armed forces and on the sidelines.

Very rarely do we find a career intellectual like Vaclav Havel, who succeeded in leading Czechoslovakia to democracy after the 1989 Velvet Revolution. Provisional leaders with the best records of success tend to have executive experience, like Lech Walesa of Poland and B.J. Habibie of Indonesia, or years of service in parties or legislatures, like Patricio Aylwin, who led Chile to democracy after the Pinochet dictatorship.

Common to all of these successful leaders was a willingness to stand up to injustice and subversion--and personalities strong enough to sweep others along with them, but not so strong that they alienated fellow elites. These are the qualities Obama must seek.

The writer is the author of *A Question of Command: Counterinsurgency From the Civil War to Iraq*.
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