

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Indo-Bangladesh river transport protocol

Secure our interest fully

ON the concluding day of the two-day meeting of the Indo-Bangladesh joint standing committee on Monday, the government is learnt to have agreed to India's proposal of nearly doubling the maintenance fee it had so far been paying for using Bangladesh's internal river routes and ports for transporting goods from India's western part to its north-eastern states. The Indian side said, the deal will be finalised in the next meeting of renewal committee on the protocol.

According to reports, India during the negotiations, had asked for increasing the number of river ports of call as well as allowing their use for transit and transshipment purposes.

But this is as good as asking for transit facility under the existing river transport protocol in exchange for only maintenance fees. It may be recalled that India has already been using the Ashuganj river port, filled up Titans river to build roads to transport heavy machinery for erecting a power plant in Agartala at its own cost.

Are we to assume that India would use Bangladesh's inland water routes and its river ports under the river transport protocol by merely footing the maintenance bill? But such wider use involves expenditures to upgrade the infrastructure.

What benefit will the government draw from it? Should not it charge tariff as a source of revenue earning for our internal water ways' use by a third country?

Experts like CPD executive director Mustafizur Rahman, who represents the core committee of the standing committee on transit, thinks that the issue cannot be looked at purely from the angle of river route protocol, but from the still wider angle of transit and transshipment. A similar view has also been echoed by M. Rahmatullah, a government representative on the core committee.

At the negotiating table, Bangladesh should put forward its case strongly for securing a deal that will protect its national interest fully and squarely.

Land management

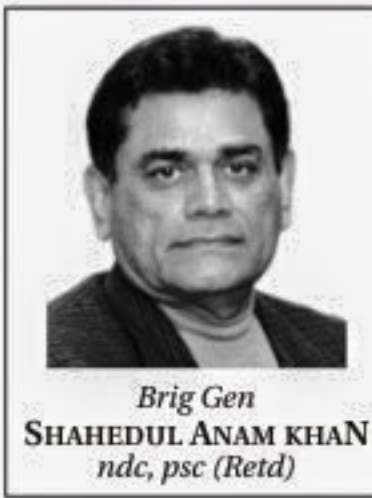
Sustainability necessary for survival

EXPERTS at a roundtable on sustainable land management in the Bangladeshi context have identified several problems in, along with some solutions to, sustainable land management in a country where, today, land is perhaps the most sought-after resource. It is limited and expensive, making it necessary to make the land we have sustainable. On the one hand, overpopulation, unplanned housing and industrialisation are creating immense pressures on the land, draining agricultural terrain of its fertility and productivity. On the other, the increasing effects of climate change such as rising water levels and salinity are posing a threat to loss of habitable land as well. It is thus imperative that we make the best use of the land we have. This requires careful planning, and designing and implementation of a comprehensive policy outlining how the land can be best used without damaging it further. When forming this policy, the abovementioned factors, not least of all the rising threat of climate change, must be taken into consideration.

The issue of illegal expropriation of land by influential quarters must also be addressed. We agree with the experts that for all this to happen, political will is key -- of the government as well as other political parties for they will be the ones to formulate and implement the policy on a durable basis. It is because of lack of such will so far that land management has been flawed and weak.

The government's ministries and departments must coordinate in planning, policy and action; other political parties must contribute to the process; and everything should be done without further delay. With environmental concerns included in the last amended version of the Constitution, protection and preservation of the environment are a duty of the State and right of the people,

Sense and sensitivity



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

THE public perception of reporters as "exploitation artists, eager to violate any moral code in pursuit of a

story" has been reconfirmed by the way a section of the electronic media has treated the murder of Sagar and Runi. It shows that some of us lack both sense and sensitivity.

Journalism cannot be bereft of sensitivity and human tragedy cannot be used to steal a march over others. After all, the electronic media is not about TRP only. News deal with human beings and require sensitive approach while covering tragic incidents, particularly those that are psychologically extremely distressing.

It is unfortunate but true that tragedies, particularly human tragedies, make compelling news and that is what "sells" to the public. But the method of presenting the facts of the tragedies appears to have been designed, by some section of the electronic media at least, as a means of one-upmanship, and certainly for certain individuals of some channels, to publicise their own image. In the process, it is the relatives of the victims who have been made to face even more trauma.

"Conflict sensitivity" is a well known jargon in journalism. And that relates to how journalists covering conflicts should treat a conflict situation and how they ought to prepare reports from events emanating out of a particular situation ranging from natural

disasters to any other form of human calamity. I am sure there is plenty in journalism literature and textbooks that teaches how to report and handle tragedies, mainly those that affect human beings, particularly children.

I cannot believe that our journalists are not aware of those. I suspect that in their enthusiasm to get the latest to the viewers those teachings have been either forgotten or deliberately disregarded. The manner of covering national tragedies, in particular the recent killing and the BDR tragedy, has not only been unprofessional, it

To be on the spot "fastest with the mostest" is a precept that may apply eminently to a military commander facing an impending attack but it can never apply to journalists. Getting the news to the people, and that too as quickly as possible, is a predilection that in most cases violates the principle of "limitation of harm" which "often involves the withholding of certain details from reports such as the names of minor children, crime victims' names or information not materially related to particular news reports release of which might, for example, harm

acts by a group of highly oppressed BDR soldiers who had no other alternative but to do what they did. Their officers were turned into demons by the electronic media both during the live telecast as well as the comments of some armchair experts on security issues in the many talk shows that followed the revolt. But, of course, there were many notable exceptions who showed good judgment and did not fall for the ordinary craving to comment, analyse and project without due diligence or deliberation.

The rigour of questioning that the 5-year old son of Runi and Sarwar was put through is contemptible. In their attempt to update and get a "first hand report" of the killings some TV reporters got hold of the only eyewitness to the gruesome murders. And to subject the little boy, who was already traumatised, and to make him relive the horrors, even though the questions may have appeared to be innocuous, belies the reporters' lack of understanding of human psychology and knowledge of ethics of journalism.

Thus, the call by this newspaper as well as the newspaper owners' association to exercise restraint is timely. We all want the murderers to be nabbed quickly. But we cannot go overboard. It is true that very often news reports have led to unearthing of a crime but lack of caution may affect the investigation of others. Media handling of tragedies, whether collective or individual, needs both sense and sensitivity.

The writer is Editor, Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

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has not conformed to the ethics of journalism either.

One cannot deny the fact that there are conflicting demands of informing the people and how much a reporter can, and should, intrude into the lives of the victims or their relatives for that purpose. And in doing so journalists must rise to international standards of reporting which requires them to be reliable by being accurate and impartial; and here "impartial" presupposes the need to be objective and balanced. And, in addition to all these the media have to be fully aware of their responsibility to the society.

someone's reputation."

The anchor chatter that we were subjected to after Mishuk's and Tareque's death went on endlessly for days that detracted the gravity of the tragedy, and for the dear and near ones it seemed as if the programmes were all about making hay when the memory of the tragedy and the victims was fresh. It was nerve-wrecking at best.

We witnessed similar lack of sensitivity during the TV coverage of the BDR mutiny. For a moment, at the very early stage of the revolt, it was quite easy for anyone not aware of the facts to mistake the rebellion and killings as justified

Indus River and the 'territorial trap'

MAJED AKHTER

THE arid world is in the throes of a water crisis. In Pakistan, where virtually all surface water comes from one river, it is natural that water anxieties revolve around the Indus River.

The Indus is a transboundary stream governed between Pakistan and India through the Indus Waters Treaty of 1960.

Celebrated by two generations of policy experts as a model of water diplomacy, the treaty has been subject to much acrimony, doubt and expert and lay speculation in the past decade. The underlying issue is that, for a number of reasons, water scarcity in the region has increased significantly over the past decade.

In irrigation-dependent agrarian Pakistan and northwest India, where millions of small farmers toil in their nations' respective breadbaskets, water scarcity is closely linked to water security, which is in turn inextricable from food security. The Indus is the lifeblood of the region, a flowing oasis in an otherwise dusty desert, and this is why the distribution of its waters rightly arouses passions and interest.

Reactions to Indus scarcity in Pakistan can be grouped into three camps. The first I call the chauvinistic camp, represented best by the shrill cries of the Difa-i-Pakistan Council. The response of this group to every international issue, from drones to dams, is to posit a binary that holds up Pakistan as violated, and external actors (mainly the US, Israel, and India) as the violators. The solution they propose is all-out war in defence of the motherland, or at least making the threat of all-out war.

In the second camp, which I call the techno-utopians, who see technol-

ogy as the cure for all social ills, who are represented by engineers, bureaucrats and some development professionals. Their proposed solutions include improving the efficiency of water delivery by lining canals and introducing drip irrigation, building more dams and drilling more wells.

Finally, there are the optimistic managers, who believe that most international misunderstandings are a result of miscommunication and poorly designed institutions. This group is composed of economists, lawyers and some development professionals. Their solutions include the generation and sharing of better-quality data between Pakistan and India on Indus water flows, participatory water management and market-based reforms.

All three camps fall into what political geographer John Agnew has called the "territorial trap" -- mistaking borders on maps for boxes that neatly partition and contain social and economic dynamics within the recognised territory of states. But, like the Indus River, social and political-economic relationships can and do transgress borders, even while being shaped by them.

A second, and not unrelated, trait of the three camps, which I call the hydrologic trap, is that they treat

water as something separate from the land on which it flows. But a river is not just water; it is the dynamic relationship between water and the land it drains. How does our understanding of the Indus waters dispute change if we steer clear of the territorial and hydrologic traps?

The most striking effect of looking at the distribution of Indus waters sans a state-centric lens is that the issue becomes one not of state rivalry, but of class and access to land. If we keep in mind that the vast majority of Indus waters are

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used for irrigation, it becomes clear that the distributational tussle is between the landed and the landless on either side of the border, not Pakistani and Indian across the border.

At least since the Green Revolution, a technological transformation of agriculture that swept North India and Pakistan in the 1960s, rates of landlessness and farm consolidation have been skyrocketing. The seed technology the Green Revolution introduced to the Indus plains dramatically increased the amount of water needed to produce crops, and in this part of South Asia, at least, access to water is closely linked with ownership of land.

About half of the rural households in Pakistan are today landless, while the top 5% of households own more

than a third of the cultivated area. A recent article on smallholder agriculture in Indian Punjab tells a similar story: about 200,000 small farmers have sold or leased their land to larger farms and have joined the ranks of landless agricultural labourers, migrated to cities, or even taken the desperate recourse of committing suicide. In other words, the people who need water the most are unable to get it because of uneven property and class relationships.

Clearly, it's a very complex issue, and we haven't even touched on the problems faced by downstream Sindh, Haryana and Rajasthan, or the elephant in the room, Kashmir, through which the majority of Indus waters pass before reaching Pakistan. But if the Indus dispute matters to us because of its implications for food security, analysing the situation in terms of Pakistan vs India simply will not do.

As decades of social science research from around the world teaches us, there is no reason why throwing technology or (ostensibly) apolitical policy solutions at a problem won't actually increase insecurity and vulnerability of the poorest. I do not reject other types of analyses in their totality: technology, policy and diplomacy are of course very important. But even the most inspired solution will fall flat on its face, and possibly exacerbate the situation, if we close our eyes to political economy and geography, and thereby fall prey to the territorial and hydrologic traps.

The writer is visiting faculty at Beaconhouse National University and is conducting doctoral dissertation research on the history and geopolitics of the Indus Waters Treaty.
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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

February 16

116 Emperor Trajan sends laureatae to the Roman Senate at Rome on account of his victories and being conqueror of Parthia.

1249 Andrew of Longjumeau is dispatched by Louis IX of France as his ambassador to meet with Mongol Khagan of the Mongol Empire.

1923 Howard Carter unveils the burial chamber of Pharaoh Tutankhamun.

1959 Fidel Castro becomes Premier of Cuba after dictator Fulgencio Batista was overthrown on January 1.

1985 Hezbollah is founded.

1987 The trial of John Demjanjuk, accused of being a Nazi guard dubbed "Ivan the Terrible" in Treblinka extermination camp, starts in Jerusalem.

2005 The Kyoto Protocol comes into force, following its ratification by Russia.