

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Meghna launch tragedy

Shockingly repetitive

WE are deeply shocked and aggrieved at the death in the launch mishap that took place at dead of night near Gazaria upazilla of Munshiganj in the river Meghna. We express our heartfelt sympathy to the families who have lost their near and dear ones in the mishap.

The death figure has already exceeded hundred and, it is feared, may rise further as many of the 250 plus passengers of the sunken vessel were missing until Wednesday evening. Unfortunately, the main culprit of the tragedy, a cargo ship, is still untraced. Clearly, the said cargo vessel was flouting the law enacted two years back that prohibits movement of cargo ships along the river routes at night.

The rescue crafts which started their operation late are finding it hard to lift the unfortunate vessel from a depth of some 70 feet from the bottom of Meghna. Regrettably, in a country where tragic launch mishaps are so frequent and take scores of lives every year, we have only two rescue vessels to carry out salvage operations after each such mishap. The shipping ministry needs to look into this limitation in rescue operation of sunken vessels.

This latest launch tragedy again points to the failure of the authorities concerned to strictly monitor the laws that control the operation and movement of river vessels. In this case, it is learnt that the launch had more passengers on board than it was permitted to carry, particularly at night.

The state of fitness, qualifications of the master and other members of the crew in charge of the ill-fated river vessel could be known only after the results of the three probe bodies formed by the shipping ministry, shipping department and the BIWTA come to light. Once the findings of the enquiry are in hand, the government must not show any mercy to those found responsible for the tragedy.

That the government has announced compensations for the families of the mishap victims deserves appreciation. But more important is ensuring monitoring and implementation of the laws to ensure that the vessels are fit and not overloaded and that they are operated by skilled crew members.

Homes for the middle class

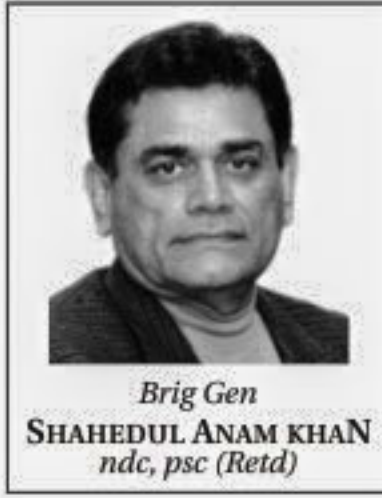
A good initiative that must be followed through

THE government's plan to build over 11,000 flats in Mirpur area of the capital, for the middle class -- low and middle income groups including journalists, farmers, freedom fighters, ethnic minority groups and the challenged -- is commendable. In the context of land and housing crises in the capital, we hope that it will contribute to easing at least some of the sufferings of the middle class.

However, there are several factors the government must take into consideration. The first is the definition of 'middle class' and categorisation of the income groups, professional groups and people in general who will qualify for the allotments. How will they be identified without discrimination among thousands of possible applicants? Second is the lottery system of awarding them, which has in the past become chaotic as well as corrupted. A prominent public housing project is a case in point which began with much fanfare but the results of which we are yet to see. This time around, measures must be taken to guard against such mismanagement. Close monitoring of the process will be necessary to ensure that the programme serves its purpose and does not just become a way of minting money for some.

Finally, as we commend the government on the initiative, we would also suggest that, if beneficial to the stakeholders and successful as a project, it should be replicated across the country. As it is, the nation is a very capital-centric one, with millions flocking to Dhaka every year, exhausting the city of its resources and its inhabitants of their basic facilities including housing, power, water, etc. If similar projects were to be set up in other parts of the country, it would ease the burden on the capital and widen the extent of development. We hope the Swapnanagar project will be extended beyond Mirpur,

Of 19 directives and 11 conditions



Brig Gen SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN ndc, psc (Retd)

WE are happy to see March 12 pass off without any major incident. And the AL leaders may have slept more peacefully that

night with the misplaced euphoria of having been able to frustrate, albeit partly, the BNP's programme. The rally happened despite the AL's best efforts and the 19 directives and 11 conditions of the police.

The three firsthand reports that appeared in this newspaper on March 12 from outside Dhaka speak of the insensitive manner in which the AL went about ensuring that the BNP's programme flopped. The three major entries to the capital were cutoff. The Paturia ferry service was suspended and the Dhaka-Chittagong and Dhaka-Sylhet highways were virtually bereft of all types of heavy transport on March 11.

On the day of the BNP rally, the BRTC buses were off the streets of Dhaka and armed AL cadres were seen patrolling the rivers as well to prevent the BNP supporters' entry into the city. And the AL leaders citing past instances of the BNP resorting to similar tactic looked comically ridiculous. I can hardly resist the temptation to reproduce a reader's comment in response to the March 13 news commentary in this paper. He sees it as a "Classic State vs The People" case.

It was a day in which we witnessed the complete blurring of the difference between the government and the party, one being completely subsumed in the other. One can only ponder with a deep sense of agony on the nature of things to come when the ruling party cadres become an appendage of the law enforcing agencies. And when that happens, the state agencies automatically become a part of the party cadres too. And that

We wonder whether the political parties have heard the very rueful remark of a young man, a vegetable vendor, blame his luck for having been born in Bangladesh. It was his sheer frustration that was talking but nonetheless that was a very damning narrative of what people think of politics in our country.



is the most frightening prospect in a democratic country.

It was a day in which we also saw a legitimate political activity circumscribed by directives and conditions. The directives, at least the first 3 of the 19, sent by the police HQ to its subordinate offices a few days prior to March 12, were meant to make it impossible for the BNP supporters to even come out of their houses. And the 11 conditions, an annexure to the very last minute permission of the DMP allowing the BNP to hold the rally, make us wonder whether we are indeed the same people that shed so much blood for our political rights?

The way the March 12 issue was handled by the AL could only have been possible by a party overcome by malicious compulsions. It was certainly not the way a government headed by a party with a long political

tradition handles the opposition. In trying to project its so-called strength, by preventing the BNP supporters from attending the rally and bringing the country to a halt virtually by an undeclared *hartal* by the government, and the capital practically put under siege, the AL has not only given the BNP a huge political mileage, it has also exposed its own fundamental weakness, its fear-psychosis -- fear to put its trust in the people -- in the people's political wisdom and in their never-failing ability to elect the best of the alternatives even if it was not always quite as good as they might expect.

All these were done, ostensibly, to provide security to the people from the so-called terrorists and disruptionists. An extremely thoughtful gesture, one must admit, on the part of the government. But one

would like to see the articulation of similar concern for the AL-called programmes as well.

If providing security means enduring personal and collective distress on the part of the public then they would rather risk the threat than put up with such insensate and outrageous actions. In any case, the public have seen through the government; the people are not quite the fool that the AL think them to be.

It was a very good example of how not to handle a political issue. It has been a case of the government cutting off its nose to spite its face. But apparently, the AL has forgotten that it has only one nose. What if the opposition chooses another day next month or the next, to organise a similar programme, which it is quite entitled to do? The government would very soon run out of noses to cut. If the government claims that it has the people's support for its policies then why resort to undemocratic measures to thwart a democratic right of the opposition?

We wonder whether the political parties have heard the very rueful remark of a young man, a vegetable vendor, blame his luck for having been born in Bangladesh. It was his sheer frustration that was talking but nonetheless that was a very damning narrative of what people think of politics in our country.

The fundamental question now is what next? The two parties, having displayed their respective strengths, and attitudes, the ruling party in particular having demonstrated its insensitivity to public woes, should have realised that they are leading the country to a political cul-de-sac, and the people may be compelled to seek an alternative political force to salvage them from the current morass.

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

Towards a hunger-free Asia and Pacific

JOSE GRAZIANO DA SILVA

ECONOMIC advance in Asia and the Pacific has been impressive in the last decades. A recent World Bank report talks about the dramatic progress in poverty reduction across the region. In 1981, 77% of Asians lived in poverty -- but by 2008 the proportion was just 14%.

Nonetheless, the Asia-Pacific region remains home to two out of every three of the world's hungry. Sixty-two percent of the undernourished population of the world lives in this region. That means around half a billion people hungry; that is half a billion too many.

The region's challenge over the next decades to 2050 will therefore be threefold: to eradicate hunger and assure everyone's right to food; to increase agricultural production in the face of climate change and rapid urbanisation; and to do it in an environmentally, socially and economically sustainable manner.

Those are of course global challenges, facing populations not just in Asia but elsewhere too. But they are of particular relevance to the world's most populous region, which is home to the vast majority of the world's small farms and where almost all of the potential arable land is already in use.

It follows that much of the food needed to feed approximately two billion extra mouths between now and mid-century will need to come from intensifying smallholder agricul-

ture on existing land rather than by opening up new areas for cultivation. Doing this without further jeopardising delicate ecosystems and limited natural resources calls for new and sustainable approaches.

In rice production, for example, new Sustainable Rice Intensification techniques that include non-flooded, aerobic rice fields are starting to replace traditional paddies. Smallholders can achieve yield increases of a ton per hectare or more, while sharply reducing water and fertilizer use and greenhouse emissions.

But while producing more food is vital, it is not enough. The world already has enough food, and yet 925 million people are undernourished. The main cause of hunger is lack of adequate access. The main issue is assuring that, starting at the local level, people have the money to buy food or can grow enough for themselves and their families. Hunger may be a global challenge. But people eat in their homes, in their cities and villages.

That means breathing new life into rural communities through: support to small-scale farmers so they can produce more, sustainably, and have

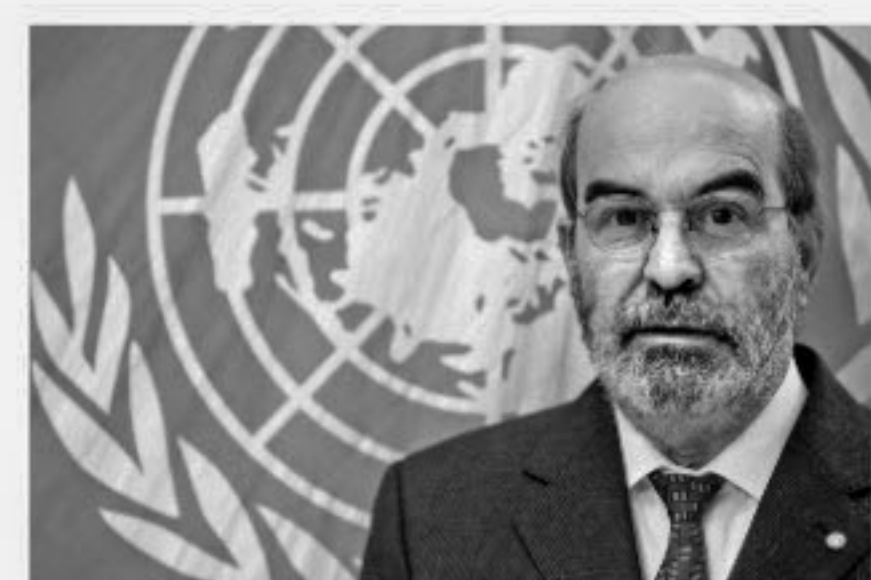
markets to sell to; cash transfers and cash for work programmes; rural employment creation; and targeted safety nets that put money in people's pockets, help to make sure their kids are well fed and go to school. Social and productive policies can and should be linked, to complete a virtuous cycle in which local consumption and production feed off each other.

Another aspect to consider in global and regional food balances is food consumption. Almost one person in two on this planet is either not eating enough, eating badly, or eating too much.

On top of the world's 925 million hungry, more than a billion people suffer from micronutrient deficiencies while another billion are overweight or obese. Then again roughly one-third of the food produced in the world for human consumption every year -- approximately 1.3 billion tonnes -- is lost or wasted.

Cutting that waste would help keep food prices down, reduce pressure on natural resources and contain greenhouse gas emissions -- and make people healthier too.

Regional cooperation is key in addressing hunger, especially through South-South cooperation, which enables developing countries to benefit from the expertise of other developing or emerging economies.



Jose Graziano da Silva

certed international effort, which lends special significance to FAO's 31st Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific taking place in Hanoi this week, with delegates from 40 countries.

Regional cooperation is key in addressing hunger, especially through South-South cooperation, which enables developing countries to benefit from the expertise of other developing or emerging economies.

FAO has 47 South-South cooperation agreements so far in the Asia Pacific region, with more than 1,500 experts and technicians from 13 countries sharing what they know in 35 host countries. Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar, Pakistan, Philippines and Viet Nam have been among the providers of South-South support.

Working together as part of the global community the Asia-Pacific region can ensure that its impressive economic advance is matched by rapid progress towards a hunger-free region.

The writer is Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 15

- 44** BC Julius Caesar, Dictator of the Roman Republic, is stabbed to death by Marcus Junius Brutus, Gaius Cassius Longinus, Decimus Junius Brutus and several other Roman senators on the Ides of March.
- 1564** Mughal Emperor Akbar abolishes jizya (per capita tax).
- 1917** Tsar Nicholas II of Russia abdicates the Russian throne and his brother the Grand Duke becomes Tsar.
- 1922** After Egypt gains nominal independence from the United Kingdom, Fuad I becomes King of Egypt.
- 1961** South Africa withdraws from the Commonwealth of Nations.
- 1990** Mikhail Gorbachev is elected as the first President of the Soviet Union.
- 2004** French President Jacques Chirac signs the law on secularity and conspicuous religious symbols in schools, commonly known as the headscarf ban.
- 2011** Beginning of the Syrian uprising.