

Dhaka Wasa: Performance and challenges

TAQSEM A. KHAN

DHAKA Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (Wasa) is a service oriented autonomous commercial organisation in the public sector, entrusted with the responsibility of providing water supply, sewerage disposal and storm water drainage services in Dhaka city. It covers more than 360 sq. km service area with production of almost 2,110 million litres of water per day (MLD). Wasa faces challenges like unplanned city development and informal settlements, transitioning to using surface water instead of groundwater, and large investment funding. But it has a number of achievements like significant increase in water production, improved service quality, increased revenue, reduction of non-revenue water, and provision of water supply at low cost.

Dhaka Wasa was established in 1963 as an independent organisation under the East Pakistan Ordinance XIX. Since then, it has been expanding its service domain and upgrading level of services to keep pace with the growing demand.

Wasa is functioning under the newly approved "Table of Organisation & Equipment" run by the Dhaka Wasa Board, which consists of 13 members who formulate policy and provide overall guidelines. The managing director is the chief executive of the organisation, and the top-level positions were reorganised by the Wasa Act, 1996. The service area of Wasa is divided into 11 zones.

The key challenges facing Wasa are briefly described below:

Unplanned city development and informal settlements: Dhaka is the world's fastest growing mega city. Each year the flow of migrants, who are mostly Low Income Community (LIC) people from rural and other urban areas, is increasing. Due to tremendous expansion and population growth over the last two decades, the city developed in an unplanned manner, and the planning for Wasa activities has to be modified to meet fast-growing demand for water.

Switching to surface water from underground extraction: Wasa has almost 100% water coverage. At present, 87% of the supply comes from groundwater, and the rest from surface water treatment. Wasa has to change its focus to surface water instead of groundwater due to rapid depletion of the groundwater level. However, treating surface water is more expensive than using ground water.

Low tariffs and large investments: The present water tariff is very low and uneconomical. An appropriate water tariff is required to balance the benefits and costs of water usage, and to ensure sufficient revenue for the long-term financial sustainability of the water supply business. However, low revenues limit the utility's capacity to make a higher contribution to investments. Wasa needs massive investment to treat surface water.

While the rate of development and

More water and sewerage treatment plants are needed. Since Dhaka city has scarcity of land and space is expensive, the treatment plants have to be compact. In addition to that, technical and financial support is also needed to find ways and means to control pollution in the Dhaka watershed.

achievement on different fronts of Wasa had not been uniform over the years, some pragmatically designed programmes were initiated by the present management over the last 18-24 months, which had encouraging results in some key areas. Such efforts have been topped up by a well-thought-out "Dhaka Wasa Turn Around" programme that identified areas of improvement, followed by appropriate action programmes for their realisation. The programme has asked for institutional reform for capacity building, promoting transparency in all activities, establishing a new chain of command for accountability, and improving its operating ratio. The programme also fosters customer service excellence by inculcating a mentality that customers are the masters and Wasa staff are the servants. Some significant areas displaying laudable achievement in the last two years are outlined below:

Reduction of non-revenue water (NRW): Like many other water supply service providers across the globe, Wasa too had to combat the issue of NRW over the last few decades. A few years ago it was above 40%, but stood at around 35%

about two years back. Recently, measures like reduction of leakage, accurate billing, metering, etc. have brought NRW down to around 29% (with a plan to reduce it to 25%).

Increase in revenue

income: There was encouraging rise of around Tk.1 billion over the preceding year (from Tk.4 billion) in the last fiscal year. The main contributing factors behind this were timely and correct billing, introduction of on-line bill paying system, expansion of outsourcing of bill collection, raising production of water, metering, regularisation of illegal connections, reduction in NRW, and annual tariff adjustment with inflation.

Operational efficiency: Wasa, despite being a public service enterprise, operates on a commercial footing. Its operating ratio was around 0.9 two years back. Currently, it is 0.79. Through efficient management on all fronts, the management plans to bring it down to 0.7 by the end of 2012.

The key achievements that reflect Wasa's commitment to better customer service are: a fully computerised billing system; monthly billing on time; 24-hour payment ability via SMS; 96% of bills sent out and 92% of bills received; and almost continuous water supply 24 hours per day 7 days a week.

Wasa plans to substitute groundwater by surface water through the construction of four large water treatment plants by

2021 at a cost of \$1.8 billion. They will draw water from more distant and less polluted rivers up to 60 km from the city, and are expected to have a combined capacity of 1,630 MLD surface water. This will allow drawing of 70% from surface water and 30% from groundwater. Wasa plans massive investment to replace dwindling groundwater resources with treated surface water. More water as well as sewerage treatment plants are needed. Since Dhaka city has scarcity of land and space is expensive, the treatment plants have to be compact. In addition to that, technical and financial support is also needed to find ways and means to control pollution in the Dhaka watershed.

Wasa needs sufficient funds for establishing more surface water treatment plants and rehabilitation of water pipelines, as well as 100% metering. A change in the attitude of Wasa staff towards ownership and business is essential. Another important area is computerisation of all system information and development of a model for system analysis. It is developing a GIS based Management Information System on computer where all information will be available and archived. It is also developing a water distribution system model of the city, which will enhance its capacity for system evaluation, operation, and planning. If it can achieve all these, Dhaka WASA will become a successful organisation in future.

The writer is Managing Director, Dhaka WASA.

The inalienable rights!

SHAKHAWAT LITON

WITH the killing of six alleged muggers in a "shootout" with Rab in Narsingdi on April 2, the list of victims of "crossfire," "shootout" and "encounter" has become longer.

How many people have lost their lives after being subject to such unlawful actions? Is there any complete record of it? Does the government have a list of such victims?

Amnesty International (AI), in a report released in August 23 last year, claimed that Rab has been implicated in the killing of at least 700 people since its inception in 2004. And of them at least 200 alleged killings have occurred since January 2009 when the current Awami League government came to power, despite the ruling party's electoral pledge to end extrajudicial executions.

In addition, the AI report said at least 30 people were killed in other police operations since early 2010, with the police also portraying them as deaths in "shootouts" or "gunfights."

The extra-judicial killings have not stopped. A national human rights watchdog,

Odhikar, in a report released on April 1 this year, claimed that 31 persons were killed in either encounter or crossfire between January and March. On the day following release of Odhikar's report, six alleged muggers were killed in a "shootout" in Narsingdi. And the same day another alleged criminal was killed in Mirpur in a "shootout" with Rab.

All the victims were citizens of Bangladesh like any of us. They too had the inalienable right to enjoy the protection of law, and to be treated in accordance with law, and only in accordance with law. They also had the guarantee that no action detrimental to their life, liberty, body, reputation or property would be taken against them, except in accordance with law.

The Constitution, the supreme law of Bangladesh, gave them the above fundamental right and the guarantee of protection. But that could not prevent them from being subject to unlawful action such as "shootout" "crossfire" and "encounter" that took away their lives.

Given the situation, one may raise some questions. Does the government think and believe that the victims were citizens of Bangladesh? Were they entitled to enjoy constitutional rights like protection to life? Can the government honestly claim that it tried to protect their rights by upholding the spirit of the Constitution? Weren't the victims denied their universal human rights as stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948?

The UDHR in the first line of its preamble says "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family" is "the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world."

The preamble states that "disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind..."

The UDHR declares that human rights are universal -- to be enjoyed by all people, no matter who they are or where they live. They include civil and political rights, like the right to life, liberty, free speech and privacy. They also include economic, social and cultural rights, like the right to social

security, health and education.

The framers of our Constitution were undoubtedly impressed with the formulation of the basic rights in the UDHR. Therefore, they relied on the spirit of UDHR in drafting the articles dealing with our fundamental rights and fundamental principles of state policies in the Constitution. If one makes a comparison of the chapter of fundamental rights and fundamental principles of state policies with the UDHR, s/he shall find that most of rights stipulated in the Declaration have found a place and also been recognised in the said two chapters of our Constitution.

For instance, one of the fundamental principles of state policy stipulated in the Constitution says the Republic shall be a democracy in which fundamental rights and freedom and respect for the dignity and worth of the human person shall be guaranteed.

Therefore, we can claim that our fundamental rights and fundamental principles of state policies are of international standard.

But the reality is bleak. Most of the people in the country are living in utter poverty and are not aware of their Constitutional rights as the country's citizens. It is not their fault, and they cannot be blamed for this. They elect their representatives with the confidence that the representatives will work for their welfare and protect their fundamental and human rights. But protectors in many cases turn into violators of people's rights. They do not hesitate to even defend those who violate

people's rights.

Apart from the public representatives, including MPs, we should not forget that there is a National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) which is supposed to work for human rights promotion and protection. According to NHRC Act 2009, the human rights

watchdog is committed to defend human rights, including the dignity, worth and freedom of every human being, as enshrined in the Constitution and different international human rights conventions and treaties to which Bangladesh is a signatory. There are many good words in the NHRC law, but they remain only on paper. The NHRC is yet to translate them into action. It is as if it is itself struggling for its right to carry out its duties properly.

As this is the prevailing situation, it is very difficult to expect that the perpetrators who violate people's fundamental and human rights will be held accountable for their actions.

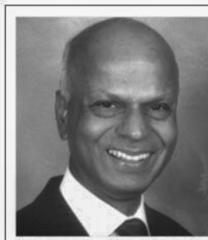
Killing of people through unlawful measures such as "shootout," "encounter" or

"crossfire" does not only deprive some people of their alienable rights to life and right to protection but also flouts the country's Constitution and negates the government's efforts to establish good governance by ensuring rule of law. These unlawful actions also deny existence of democracy in the country as democracy becomes meaningless without the basic and fundamental rights of individuals. History shows that disregarding of human rights can't bring anything good for a nation or for mankind.

The writer is a senior reporter of The Daily Star. Email: shakhawatliton@gmail.com

LETTER FROM EUROPE

The Britannica and I



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM

I have just read in the newspaper that for business reasons the publishers of the Encyclopaedia Britannica have decided to discontinue its print version after 244 years of glorious service to the English-

speaking peoples of the world, and I must confess that I am feeling both sad and nostalgic about it.

My relationship with the Britannica has been a special one, which started when I was a little boy and still continues. It was 1947. I was 11 years old. Because of the Partition, we had just moved from West Bengal to East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). My father took me to a nearby school for admission. Once the formalities were over at the registrar's office my father asked to see the headmaster for a few minutes, if he was free. The headmaster was most kind. Almost immediately, he invited us into his office. Needless to say, even though I was with my father, I felt rather awed. The headmaster was a learned man. While he and my father conversed, I saw two things in his office -- one was a long cane on his desk which certainly looked threatening, and the other, an impressive set of gold-lettered reference books in a locked bookcase. That was my first encounter with the Encyclopaedia Britannica. If there is anything called love at first sight that was it.

It was one of the proud possessions of the school, a gift, I was told, from a British educationist who loved India. It was too precious to be kept in the open shelves of the school library. Not everybody had access to it. Only the teachers and senior students were authorised to consult it and it was always under the watchful eyes of the librarian or the headmaster himself. I became an exception either because of the special relationship my father had with the headmaster or because he soon realised that he and I shared the same sort of love and respect for those coolly authoritative volumes in which so much of human knowledge was stored. Gradually I earned the headmaster's trust. So much so that he soon appointed me as the unofficial keeper of the Britannica, which entailed responsibilities such as cleaning the shelves and dusting all the books contained in that bookcase. That was a job I loved.

Then I left home to go to other institutions of higher education but the memories of that school, its kind erudite headmaster and, of course, the twenty odd volumes of the Britannica lingered on in me for ever. I do not

A deep sense of loss has taken hold of me. I also feel oddly resentful about the whole affair. I think, unreasonably, that a lifelong companion has just gone away for good without having an opportunity to say a proper goodbye.

know what happened to those volumes. Bruce Springsteen, the Boss, sang: "Everybody's got a hungry heart." I am sure that those books satisfied the hungry hearts of generations of students who came after me.

Like so many other major British contributions to knowledge and learning, the Britannica had its origins in Scotland. It was the idea of Colin Macfarquhar, a bookseller, and Andrew Bell, an engraver. Both of them lived in Edinburgh and "were inspired by the intellectual ferment of the Scottish Enlightenment." The first edition came out in 1771. Almost immediately, it became a huge success with students, teachers and intellectuals of the day. The third edition, published in 1797, "established the foundation of the Britannica as the definitive reference work for the next two centuries."

Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., an American corporation that is the current publisher of the Britannica, has been based in Chicago for more than a hundred years. The company has assured Britannica's readers across the world that even though the print edition is going to disappear, the online edition will not only continue but also will be "updated continuously." It would also be "much more expansive" and will have "multimedia."

I know that the digitisation of the print medium is "an inexorable trend that will continue." But can the internet replace the touch and feel of a physical book? I agree with the Spanish thinker Vicente Molina Foix when he writes, besides acquiring knowledge "pleasure has always been the higher raison d'être of the practice of reading. A real physical book adds to the act of reading an unquestionable sensual sentimental complement."

In any case, a deep sense of loss has taken hold of me. I also feel oddly resentful about the whole affair. I think, unreasonably, that a lifelong companion has just gone away for good without having an opportunity to say a proper goodbye.

The writer is an Officer of the Order of Queen Isabel I of Spain (La Católica) and a Daily Star columnist.