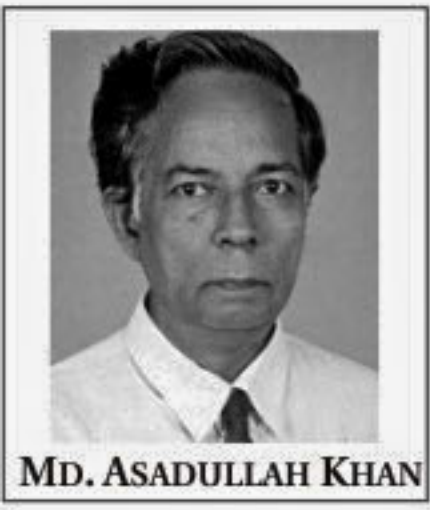


BITTER TRUTH

Smothering the wellspring of life



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

THE sea is the Earth's life support system. The services rendered by it are so fundamental that most of us tend to take them for granted. Scientists have

brought it home to us that without the ocean, the Earth might be lot like Marsa place inhospitable for us and the rest of life on Earth. The sea shapes the character of this planet, governs weather and climate, stabilises temperature, yields to the atmosphere the moisture that falls back on the land, replenishing Earth's fresh water in rivers, lakes and streams. Oxygen is generated there and carbon dioxide absorbed.

Most of the earth is ocean (about 97%). In the past century, without much thought about the consequences, we have removed billions of tons of living creatures from the sea and added billions of tons of toxic substances to it. Marine life is regarded as a commodity and not as a vital component of a living system upon which we are entirely dependent.

A vital source of protein is fish, and the bulk of the supply comes from the sea. The world's fish harvest has risen from 49 million metric tons in 1965 to over 110 million metric tons today. Much of the increase has come from farmed fish. According to the United Nation's Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), around 60% of the fish stock is now being harvested beyond sustainable limit. This also creates a hazard of unimaginable magnitude. But if over-fishing continues, it could hurt countries like Bangladesh, the Philippines, Maldives and Sri Lanka because people there rely more heavily on fish for protein than other richer nation. Fish, it would seem, are proving Malthus right. No one really knows what the consequences will be of over-fishing or ocean dumping.

The biggest assault has been made on coral reefs, vast variegated architectures of

limestone and living tissue that serve as iridescent underwater cities for countless plants and fish. Many prized species are captured by an insidious fishing method involving sodium cyanide, literally called a murder weapon. In measured doses cyanide temporarily stuns fish, making them easy to catch. The toxin is then naturally flushed from a fish's system. But there is no mechanism for purging the cyanide from the waters on which it is sprayed.

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pumped into the coral reefs of South East Asia," reports Robert Johannes, an American biologist. The result, he says, is a vast and expanding ecological tragedy. Less than 1% of the reefs are protected from such practices worldwide, says Jane Lubchenco, a marine biologist at Oregon State University.

Cyanide fishing involves consumers who want an exotic commodity, dealers who make a fortune selling it and impoverished producers whose livelihood depends on the business. At the same time, the demand for live banquet fish is virtually insatiable in ever more affluent Asia. And there is much more

at risk than a single endangered species.

Coral reefs are formed from the limestone skeletons of tiny animals that are related to jelly fish. Ecologically, the reefs are to the oceans what forests are to continents; they are shelters and breeding grounds for fish and plant species that will disappear without them. Reports say that an estimated 600,000 sq. km of reef have been destroyed in the past 50 years due to a variety of causes, including industrial pollution.

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DAVID HENDERSON

most harm to ocean life. They don't as much as fishing does. Fishing ships trailing nets at least a kilometre long -- capable of hauling 400 tons of fish in a single gulp -- wreak far more havoc on marine life than spilled oil. One estimate says that along with 80 million tons of fish extracted an additional 20 million tons of unwanted fish, sea birds, marine mammals and turtles die. Like tropical rainforests coral reefs are among the world's most diverse and productive ecosystems. They are a source of bioactive compounds for medicine. The economy of many countries is dependent on sea wealth and corals.

Fishing techniques, such as the use of heavy trawls, destroy the ocean floor ecosystem on which the fish depend. Studies in Australia indicate that even 15 years after closing of an area to all fishing, the sea floor habitat had not recovered from the effects of trawling. Climate change resulting in change of temperature of sea water in the past decade has affected production and growth of sea creatures to a large extent. What is not so well known, but sheds light on the potential for loss of fish production

as the oceans warm, is the increase in carbon dioxide and decrease in oxygen from a high 1 ml/litre to less than 0.1ml/litre over the 10 year period ending in 1979. The collapse of the fisheries in the Black Sea is an example of the rapid decline that can happen once conditions deteriorate past a critical threshold.

Gravity is the sea's enemy. Silt running off dirt roads and clear cut forest land ruins coral reefs. Pesticides and other toxics sprayed and washed into rivers find the oceans as the last destination. The biggest sources of coastal pollution are waste from farm ani-

mals, fertilisers and human sewage. They can spawn red tides and other harmful algal blooms that rob oxygen from the water, killing sea life. With decline in fish population, the biologically richest stretches of ocean are more disrupted than the richest places on land. Continents have wildernesses where motorised vehicles have never gone, but on the world's continental shelves, it is hard to find places where boats dragging nets haven't etched into seafloor habitats.

How much can we take from the ocean's living systems without disrupting the way the ocean works, either as continuing

source of sea food or as functioning life support system? How long can we get away with dumping into the sea, through either deliberate waste disposal or the inadvertent flow of contaminants from land and sky?

This brings to our notice the depletion of the enormous wealth of the Bay of Bengal. Unlike other seas in the world, the Bay of Bengal possesses a huge stock of fish, minerals and marine energy. The presence of several mighty rivers to the north and their contribution to huge sediment transportation from a vast catchment area of the Himalayas play a significant role in the physical environment of the Bay. These rivers carry about 24 billion tons of sediments along with a huge volume of water every year into the Bay.

Reports say that Thailand and Myanmar illegally catch fish from the territorial and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of Bangladesh. But now, with the rights of Bangladesh established by the international arbitration council, fish landing can be increased several times the present catch through improvements and use of mechanised equipment. The Bay remains vastly unexplored because of lack of expertise and modern equipment, but significant amounts of hydrocarbon and some heavy radioactive beach sands have been discovered. About 472 species of fin-fish and 10 species of shell-fish have been identified so far.

The sea is the wellspring of life. Without healthy seas, humanity would be doomed. Yet we keep on destroying our most precious resource without knowing what we are losing. The wealth of nations spans nutritional, climatological, biological, aesthetic, spiritual, emotional and ethical realms. We have the power to eliminate creatures from the sea as surely as we have eliminated creatures from the land, but with each loss the living fabric that makes the planet hospitable becomes weaker, less stable and more likely to evolve in new directions not to our liking.

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Revolutions through social networking websites

MD. ARIF IQBAL KHAN

GOVERNMENTS panic at the sound of facebook, especially if that government is despotic and corrupt like Mubarak's or Assad's. Governments want to believe that they are popular, liked, and more importantly, they desperately want public opinion favouring them.

Mass people, governments hope, should not have any alternative source of power which could take away their control over the people.

Mubarak thought he could bulldoze his compatriots to surrender to his will. He thought he could control Egypt from his headquarters in Heliopolis. He was deaf, dumb and blind. He did not see that Tahrir Square had already assumed power in Egypt--since that's where all the emotions, thoughts and feelings of the people converged.

Mubarak was cut off from the people. Tahrir Square represented those same people abandoned by him. Who was behind this brilliant revolution?

Facebook, twitter, myspace, blogs and other sites fuelled the engine of a new age revolution. Mobile phones, providing internet access with facebook and twitter applications, made it possible to organise anti-government rallies by social activists. They reached out to thousands who were connected to each other as 'friends.'

The underlying theme is the 'right to political activism' against threats to free speech. The right to express ones' self, especially against injustice, seek out ways that eventually defeats the forces which are against those basic rights. Bengalis did it in 1971 through an armed struggle. Arabs did it in 2011 through facebook. That is the essential transition from one generation to another.

Arab societies are still living under dictators, although the age of secret police is over, they are not yet free from tyranny. Ghaddafi, Mubarak, Ben Ali and Assad survived by the use of force. Secret police (*makhbarat*) was the public face of their cruelty. Arab youth could not speak against dictatorships without being subjected to brutality. There was always a convenient story to justify force against the public.

Dictators resorted to using causes such as protecting national security, fighting Israeli occupation of Palestine and threats of foreign (western) intervention as justifications for their criminal deeds.

A young man was tortured to death in Alexandria on allegations of spying for Israel, none of which

was ever proved. Libya was the graveyard for youths who were often blamed for helping western backed anarchy. Assad continues to shell towns accusing Syrians of terrorism in own country.

Such tailor-made stories are not good enough anymore to convince the people, them being more aware nowadays of international politics and domestic issues due to internet-based news sites. Sitting in a café in Cairo Mousa Enver can browse through a dozen newspapers and an equal number of news blogs. All of which will update him about the most recent events from around the world.



PHOTO: AFP

All these years people were told that Arab governments needed guns to protect the country. The site of Arab forces firing on unarmed citizens unfolded the real picture. The arms were meant for Arabs. Revolutionary youths therefore needed a much faster, more lethal and an intelligent weapon to win.

Mousa has a twitter account where he tweets news on his favourite subjects. His 'followers' get one-stop global news and views through his tweets. Mousa's friends upload those stories on facebook pages where they have thousands of friends who in turn are members of groups where thousands more are members, many of them reading and commenting on those stories.

This is the new platform where news and views can circulate amongst thousands of youths in a matter of minutes. It gets more rewarding for them as readers can make 'comments', 'like' and 'share' the info with others, all of which makes them feel closer to the events.

Public opinion generates and breeds through the participation of common people, providing dictators with sleepless nights and a frantic search for revenge.

All the dictators who fell in 2011, from Tunis to Sana, blamed the Islamic bogey man al-Qaeda. They wanted to appeal to the western democracies that they were the faithful (and the last) defenders of western values in the Islamic heartland. They wanted Arabs to believe that Tahrir Square was occupied by armed jihadists, drugged by the talibans. Failing on such nonsense, they resorted to the method they are most comfortable with.

Tanks and soldiers rolled out to crush the revolts. All these years people were told that Arab governments needed guns to protect the country from Israeli or western aggression. The site of Arab forces firing on unarmed citizens unfolded the real picture. These arms and ammunitions were not meant for Israelis. They were meant for Arabs. Revolutionary youths therefore needed a much faster, more lethal and an intelligent weapon to win.

Internet technology was engaged with common people and helped them to build an opinion against their dictators. Voices against injustice were carried by a medium based on internet technology. Free speech combined with courage and assisted by the technology produced that much needed weapon of choice for revolutionariesfacebook, twitter, blogs and a bag full of courage outsmarted the mukhabarat.

BouAziza's tragic end in flames was recorded and posted on facebook. Anger and hatred at the regime were being expressed on facebook posts and being shared around the network gathering thousands for a final showdown. The

secret police of Ben Ali could not track the organisers who changed their locations in anticipation of a crackdown.

Egyptians learned the game very quickly. They used facebook and twitter to organise protestors into one collective movement that galvanised at Tahrir Square. Mubarak, Ben Ali, Ghaddafi, Ali Abdallah Saleh (and hopefully Assad) must owe their hugely deserving disgraceful end in part to facebook. Arab Spring did not end with the fall of a few dictators. It may be the new hope for youths currently living under tyranny.

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Non-partisan interim government, a must

MD. ATAUR RAHMAN

WE have seen how the present government raised barricades by using the administration, law enforcing agencies and Awami League cadres to foil the grand rally held in Dhaka by BNP-led opposition parties on March 12. Dhaka was totally isolated from other parts of the country for 3 days through stopping of buses, steamers, launches and trains by the administration and law enforcing agencies at the instruction of the government. An unofficial *hartal* was observed throughout the country. Live telecasting of the speech of the leader of the opposition by 3 private TV channels was also suddenly stopped. Moreover, government officers/officials were forced to attend the political rally, human chain and grand rally of the ruling party with banners on March 7, 11, and 14, respectively, which were telecast live by the TV channels. As such, it has been clearly proved by the above instances that a fair, neutral, transparent and acceptable Parliament election is not possible under this government with the politicised administration and law enforcing agencies.

Moreover, the majority of the people also want that the next Parliament election to be held under a non-partisan, neutral interim government. In this context, it may be mentioned here that out of 13 Amici Curiae invited by the Supreme Court to give their opinions, 12 advocated in favour of the non-partisan, neutral caretaker government. Of course, they opined that the judiciary should not be involved in the process. Many eminent citizens of the country also opined in favour of a non-partisan, neutral caretaker government while discussing with the Committee for Reforms and Amendment of the Constitution. As per survey reports conducted by some newspapers, including *Prothom Alo*, more than 90% people of the country are in favour of a caretaker government.

In view of the facts stated above, a non-partisan, neutral interim government is a must for conducting the next Parliament election in a free, fair, impartial and transparent environment that would be acceptable both at home and abroad. I would like to suggest the following formula for formation of the government:

BNP will propose 5 names of non-partisan, neutral persons acceptable to Awami League, while Awami League will propose 5 names of non-partisan, neutral persons acceptable to BNP, who will act as advisers of the interim government, and these 10 persons will propose the name of 1 non-partisan, neutral person acceptable to both BNP and Awami League, who will act as chief adviser of the non-partisan, neutral interim government.

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