

Groundwater extraction in Chittagong

The issue merits serious attention

THERE is little question that there is today an acute crisis over drinking water in the country. On top of that, when news comes in of residents in particular localities being put to an even worse crisis through the work of plants extracting groundwater and selling them, there is grave reason for concern. Briefly, the tubewells which the residents of Middle Halishahar in Chittagong have been wont to using for long are rapidly being rendered pointless because of the receding level of groundwater. And that, if residents' complaints are anything to go by, has happened because of the rampant manner in which three private firms have been extracting groundwater in the area over the past three years.

In an overall sense, the water crisis in this particular area has been made even more acute owing to the steady filling up of ponds with the arrival of new people. We thus have a situation where extraction of groundwater by private companies together with an increase in population has been contributing to the making of bad circumstances getting worse.

That said, there are now all the questions regarding the operations of the three private firms. Two of these firms, we have been informed, have the requisite documents to carry on with their work. The work of the third is open to question. Now, what needs to be seen is whether the two firms which supposedly have all their papers in order are extracting water at a level permissible under the regulations. Judging by the figures the firms have proffered and also through assessing the matter of how much water they actually extract, it becomes important for the authorities to ascertain the truth here.

Beyond and above all such factors, it is essential that no administrative move involved in the working of private water selling companies comes in the way of citizens' need for water. The moral aspects of the issue far outweigh any other consideration. Besides, the question of how such insensitive extraction of groundwater affects the environment also needs to be squarely addressed.

Journalists an endangered species

World Press Day reveals the truth

OSERVING the World Press Day on Thursday, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon expressed grave concern over the mounting deaths of journalists the world over. Reporters Without Borders, an international organization defending press freedom, has mentioned in its reports that more than 60 journalists were killed in 2011 alone while 22 reporters and six bloggers have already been killed since the start of this year. The UN secretary general further noted that journalists "face intimidation, harassment and censorship at the hands of the governments, corporations and powerful individuals seeking to preserve their power or hide wrongdoings and misdeeds." This conspicuous rise in torturing and killing journalists owes completely to the culture of impunity that perpetrators enjoy.

Bangladesh has ranked 129th out of 179 countries in the press freedom index that Reporters Without Borders published in January this year. It is little solace that we are ahead of India and Pakistan but our statistics and even freedom ranking for that matter portray a dismal picture. What particularly stands out as a test case is the law enforcers' failure to track down the masterminds behind the killing of the journalist couple Sagar and Runi.

It is noteworthy that apart from one or two stray cases, most incidents were politically motivated involving party cadres, powerful people and law enforcers. In some cases, the governments themselves have stifled the operational freedom of particularly the electronic media. Coming from democratic governments even just a few instances are unacceptable.

In a country like ours, free and independent media enjoying public confidence is an instrument for not only strengthening democracy but also helping the government with a reliable feedback mechanism. Therefore, the onus is on the government to promote press freedom and bring to book the perpetrators of crimes committed against journalists.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

May 6

1857
The British East India Company disbands the 34th Regiment of Bengal Native Infantry whose sepoy Mangal Pandey had earlier revolted against the British and is considered to be the First Martyr in the War of Indian Independence.

1889
The Eiffel Tower is officially opened to the public at the Universal Exposition in Paris.

1910
George V becomes King of the United Kingdom upon the death of his father.

1916
21 Lebanese nationalists executed in the Martyrs' Square, Beirut by Jamal Pasha, the Ottoman wáli.

2001
During a trip to Syria, Pope John Paul II becomes the first pope to enter a mosque.

SUNDAY POUCH



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

YESTERDAY afternoon, Hilary Clinton, the US Secretary of State, arrived in Dhaka. So far she had a busy schedule here. Besides

meeting her counterpart Dipu Moni she called on our prime minister as well as the leader of the opposition. A meeting with a select group of civil society members is fixed for this morning as well as with our Nobel Laureate Mohammed Yunus. She flies off to India in the afternoon. Hillary's visit to Bangladesh is not sudden. Nor is it a goodwill visit. Although this is her first visit as a Secretary of State, the last time she came to Dhaka twelve years back she was then the first lady of the US.

Bangladesh has hosted several high ranking State Department officials this year alone. Robert Blake, Assistant Secretary of State, came in February. Under-Secretary of State Wendy Sherman followed in April. Assistant Secretary of State Andrew Shapiro then arrived to join the first ever security dialogue between Bangladesh and the USA. The dialogue was held to identify the security challenges facing the two countries. Hillary Clinton has come to now wrap up the discussions that have taken place so far.

While commenting on the security dialogue, the US described it as "a robust engagement between the US and Bangladesh as well as our growing defense relationship." It said that "the positive and substantial exchanges reflected the breadth, depth and strength of the bilateral defense relationship as well as our shared commitment to peace and prosperity in the region." In short, the US feels that these discussions with Bangladesh which is now "one of the most robust in South Asia is because Bangladesh is a key player in maintaining security in the Bay of Bengal. She is also an active partner in regional counter terrorism efforts."

In addition to security consultations, the US has also shown interest in Bangladesh's military modernization plan. For sometime now Bangladesh had been looking for "partners for affordable defense systems." The US supports this modernization effort through its Excess Defense Articles Program, which makes US equipment that is surplus to their needs, made available to other countries. The US at the same time appreciates Bangladesh's UN peace keeping efforts. Through

Hillary Clinton comes calling

training and military exchanges the US has helped Bangladesh armed forces to professionalise itself. It is US' strong belief that by helping Bangladesh upgrade its military, it is also helping to enhance its own national security.

It must be remembered that the US is now disengaging itself from south west Asia. It has already withdrawn its combat troops from Iraq. It will leave Afghanistan in 2014. President Obama, in an unannounced visit to Kabul last week, signed an agreement with President Karzai which outlined how the US will remain engaged there after the withdrawal of US forces. The US is also trying to quickly repair its damaged relationship with Pakistan especially between their military. India is already cooperating with the US on various strategic and nuclear issues. The US has thus woven a tapestry of friendly countries around the Indian and Pacific Oceans to protect its strategic interests. It has encouraged Japan and Australia as well as neighbouring India to help it implement this geo-

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strategic vision. The US has also moved to ease economic sanctions against Myanmar and to draw it into this strategy. Iran is the only country in this area that has been left out of this great game.

To the US, Bangladesh must be drawn now into its grand strategy. By showcasing a robust relationship with a moderate Muslim country like Bangladesh, the US also wants to send a strong signal that it can work closely with countries having large population of Muslims. A relevant question here is whether the US is doing all this to contain the growing strategic and military might of China? The answer is not yet very clear. Both the countries have annual consultations on strategic issues and frequently collaborate on regional and world issues. They may have differences over the nature of governance in each other's countries or even over human rights. Yet they work closely. But India seems to have joined hands with the USA mainly to contain China.

The US has another immediate

reason in following this grand strategy. It wants to be sure that no rogue element could scuttle ships carrying vital oil and gas supplies through the two major maritime choke points, one at the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf near Iran, and the other close to Indonesia in the Straits of Malacca. Any disruption in the flow of oil through these straits would cripple many of the major economies in Asia and Australia and will damage western interests.

So the US is bolstering the military strength of all the countries in the region so that they are able to combat any such mischief on their own. Bangladesh is a littoral country along the Indian Ocean. It is well placed geographically in the Bay of Bengal to see that no such mischief takes place. Hillary is here to see that a "US-Bangladesh partnership cooperation" declaration is announced that would take care of such eventualities when the two countries will be able to consult and act jointly.

The strategic importance of Bangladesh had been further enhanced

by the stunning verdict given recently by the International Tribunal of the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) on the maritime border dispute with Myanmar. The award gave Bangladesh 111,000 square kilometers of exclusive economic zone in the Bay of Bengal with sovereign rights over all the resources there. It is expected that the area awarded may have gas and oil reserves as well as valuable minerals. US companies are keen to bid for exploitation rights there now, before Chinese companies come along and put them at a disadvantage. The US government could request that another 6 blocks in addition to the two given already to Conoco-Philips be awarded to US companies. Clinton may have talked about a mega energy deal if she finds Bangladesh government amenable.

There are a lot of speculative reports that Hillary has talked with the government and opposition leaders about ways to overcome the political impasse on the caretaker government. But it must be clear the US administration will face

presidential election this year. Hilary could at best, in her talks with them and the civil society, be able to gauge the political temperature. However, the US wishes to finalise the long pending Trade and Investment Cooperation Framework Agreement (TICFA) between the two countries. This would allow the US to have a say in our trade and investment matters too. Bangladesh's concern with regard to duty free exports of our ready made garments to the US needs early resolution. It would also like to be included in the Millennium Challenge Account. All these must have been horse traded last night. The press conference would reveal all that happened.

Secretary Hillary after leaving Bangladesh will travel to Delhi. But she will stop by in Kolkata to meet the mercurial Chief Minister of West Bengal province, Mamata Banerjee. It is reported that Hillary will try to understand how Mamata looks at the future relationship between India and Bangladesh. This is critical for the US as Mamata had put a spanner last September and scuttled the proposed agreement on the sharing of the waters of the Teesta river. This has upset not only Bangladesh leaders but also the man in the street in this country.

The immediate result has been the postponement by Bangladesh allowing India the use of Chittagong port for transit of goods to the north eastern Indian states. This has also delayed the transit through Bangladesh which India had planned to use in its own interest. This has inevitably created a critical gap in the seamless security strategy designed by the US for this sub-region. The Kolkata meeting therefore is important for the US.

It is yet too early to say that Hilary's visit will clear the clouds that had gathered over US-Bangladesh bilateral relations. This was after the US got a rebuff, when it requested for a dignified exit for Nobel Laureate Yunus from Grameen Bank. Like the proverbial elephant, big powers always have long memories. But that Hillary has come to Bangladesh at her own initiative and has her own agenda and programme speaks much about US diplomacy. We all hope that the government understands this and will not use the visit to cash in politically.

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| The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

Greater Asian integration

EDITORIAL DESK: CHINA DAILY

THOUGH Asian economies as a whole have so far fared better than Europe and the United States, their need to build a regional firewall against a possible escalation of the global financial crisis is no less imperative.

So the joint announcement by China and South Korea on Wednesday that they will formally start negotiations on a free trade agreement this month is welcome.

South Korea expects the planned deal will increase its GDP growth by around 1 percentage point and create between 190,000 and 250,000 new jobs within five years after its implementation.

Given the huge size of the Chinese economy, the direct impact of the deal on China is understandably

less predictable. But the bilateral trade volume that is set to reach US\$300 billion by 2015 speaks volumes about the importance of such an agreement.

More importantly, amid rising protectionism and the fragile global recovery, the accord can serve as a much-needed starting point for Asian countries to further deepen economic cooperation and integration.

After seven years of preparation, the forthcoming negotiations be-

tween China and South Korea show that Asian policymakers are beginning to pay more attention to the long-term challenges posed by the ongoing global rebalancing and over-

all structural transformation. The global crisis is a wake-up call for Asia, which for decades has largely built its economic success on the seemingly insatiable demand from European and US consumers.

To weather a renewed financial crisis and weakened export demand

from developed markets, Asian economies must update their growth model to better tap the booming markets at home.

The potential of consumption growth in China, the world's second largest economy, has become more obvious as the country shifts steadily away from its dependence on exports and investment for growth.

The planned FTA between China and South Korea will set a good example of how closer economic integration helps advance bilateral and regional prosperity and stability.

It will also act as foundation and driving force for the proposed three-way China-Japan-South Korea FTA.

It is hoped that more such regional efforts to accelerate economic integration will build a real firewall in Asia against another global crisis.