

High Court ruling on illegal landfill welcome

Natural water bodies under threat

THE verdict of the High Court on July 30 ordering the Department of Environment (DoE) to desist from issuing environment and site clearances to the errant Hallmark Group intending to establish an industrial park is much welcome news. Indeed, the real estate agency has been ordered to refrain from carrying out all activities, including land filling in the areas Kandibaliarpur, Nandankhali, Jamur, Muchipara and Vopri moujas of Savar upazila for the duration of the stay order. The Court has gone further and asked the DoE why it chose to waive 90 per cent of the penalty slapped on Hallmark for failing to obtain environmental clearance certificate prior to embarking on the project.

While the Court has stepped in to stop one company from taking advantage of poor oversight of regulatory bodies such as Rajdhani Unnayan Katiripakhha (Rajuk), the wholesale destruction of the environment in and around Dhaka continues unabated, largely due to unplanned urbanisation. With the convergence of illegal business interests comprising primarily of a section of real estate companies and corrupt officials belonging to regulatory bodies such as Rajuk, DoE, Dhaka's canals, wetlands and lakes are being filled up at an alarming rate. The fact that the Master Plan for Dhaka city is being violated and the Wetland Conversation Law 2000 is ignored at will is testament to widespread institutionalised corruption that exists among regulatory bodies entrusted with the safeguarding of Dhaka's environmental conservation.

Though the Detailed Area Plan, which in itself is a cornerstone of the city's master plan was made public in June, 2010, its implementation remains suspect due to vehement opposition put up by the real estate sector. That is hardly surprising given that the plan details every wetland, canal, lake in the division. With clear demarcation of roads and water bodies, its implementation would effectively free up significant agriculture land from unauthorised housing projects and industries. It is imperative for the government to realise that unless lakes such as Gulshan- Banani-Baridhara and wetlands of Dhaka are demarcated and preserved today, the ecosystem of the city will suffer irreparable damage, leading to frequent urban floods and depletion of water tables.

Hooligans in the street

Stark manifestation of lawlessness

IT seems gangsters have a free rein on major city thoroughfares, while members of the law-enforcing agencies look away.

The case in point is Monday's incident at Sheorapara bridge point. Bullies armed with lethal weapons and in cahoots with the conductor and helper of a human hauler beat up mercilessly two commuters in full view of the on-duty traffic sergeant and a passing vehicle of the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab).

The traffic sergeant and the Rab personnel gave their own excuses as to why they could not intervene and save the victims. Taking advantage of this situation the hooligans had a field day with their victims and then left the spot unchallenged.

It is totally unacceptable that the citizens including commuters and pedestrians will remain at the mercy of criminals on the streets in this way. Police or any other members of the law-enforcing agency cannot evade their responsibility in averting any such untoward incident happening before their own eyes.

The way the commuters were assaulted by some transport workers and their hired goons somewhat reminds us of the lynching of six youths at Aminbazar last year. The only difference is the Sheorapara victims were left with injuries. Such acts of outrage take place from time to time at different places in the country, a large percentage of which go unreported.

The incident sets off an alarm clock for the law-enforcers to mount greater surveillance at numerous vulnerable points at highways and streets.

This being the festival season with heavy movement of people, the criminals will be on the prowl. Matching the scenario the government must increase the number and frequency of police patrol on the streets to ensure safety

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

- August 1
- 527

Justinian I becomes the sole ruler of the Byzantine Empire.
- 902

Taormina, the last Byzantine stronghold in Sicily, is captured by the Aghlabid army.
- 1192

Richard the Lionheart landed on Jaffa and defeated the army of Saladin
- 1664

The Ottoman Empire is defeated in the Battle of Saint Gotthard by an Austrian army led by Raimondo Montecuccoli, resulting in the Peace of Vasvár.
- 1914

Germany declares war on Russia at the opening of World War I. The Swiss Army mobilises because of World War I.
- 1927

The Nanchang Uprising marks the first significant battle in the Chinese Civil War between the Kuomintang and Communist Party of China. This day is commemorated as the anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army.
- 1960

Islamabad is declared the federal capital of the Government of Pakistan.

GROUND REALITIES



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

whether he was not worried about his defiance of the Pakistan government. His response was straight and fierce. "What do you mean government? I am the government," he said. It was a mark of the supreme confidence with which he was providing leadership to the Bengali nationalist struggle at the time.

On Monday, it was another demonstration of confidence which came our way when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina appeared on the BBC's HardTalk programme. Anyone who has seen Tim Sebastian or Stephen Sackur operate will have a fairly rough idea of how agonising it can be for those who have appeared or intend to appear before them. There are a very good number of people in Bangladesh who clearly feel Sheikh Hasina ought not to have appeared before Sackur. Again, there are those who believe she was not being able to articulate her views in an organised manner on the programme. Neither of the two opinions is something you can quite agree with.

If anything, the Bangladesh leader was in her element before Sackur. You may not agree with her responses to his questions. Indeed, she could have been more assertive and certainly more logical in her presentation of views. Frankly, she could have done herself a whole lot of good by not trying to defend herself over some controversial moves made by

her government in the three and a half years it has been in office. In other words, there is a whole swathe of reasons that might inform you that her answers to Sackur did not quite tally with your take on the conditions that were being talked about on HardTalk. But that the prime minister did not flinch at the questions, the reality that she did not lose her composure, is a truth you cannot quite deny, even if politically as well as ideologically you are at a great remove from her.

In a larger sense, though, Sheikh Hasina needs to reach out to the whole country, across the spectrum, if she means to change it for the better. And then, of course, will come the pivotal question in national politics: after Sheikh Hasina, who?

The truth today is that Sheikh Hasina wields a huge degree of authority, perhaps a whole lot more than the power wielded by Bangabandhu in his time. Around the Father of the Nation were figures with whom he had conducted the movement for the Six Points and then the struggle for liberation. Tajuddin Ahmed, Syed Nazrul Islam, A.H.M. Quamruzzaman and M. Mansoor Ali were not men who grew or lived in Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's shadow. They reached the higher perches of leadership through their distinctive, separate struggles. In Sheikh Hasina's case, there is almost a feeling of unchallenged authority she employs both in her party and in the administration of the state. No minister speaks or steps out of line, for the prime minister is in absolute charge.

Which of course leads you to that overwhelming question: to what extent

does such extraordinary authority translate into purposeful leadership? The answer is simple, to the extent of its being obvious: there are all the places where Sheikh Hasina has faltered over the years, moments when her comments on national issues and personalities could have been more subtle. You see her point somewhat when she comes down hard on those who, in the days of the emergency when politics was in a state of banishment, went ahead with forming political parties that

ended up in smoke. That clear sense of indignation is there. You might understand it or you might not. But you cannot ignore it.

With Sheikh Hasina, there has been that certain strain of belief which has her lapsing into the use of the first person singular every time she speaks of her government. That explains the confidence with which she tells Sackur: "I believe only I can do it." It is a trait which has roots, again, in Bangabandhu. And it is one which is not confined to Sheikh Hasina alone. Politicians by and large have made a grab for it. Which is pretty interesting, for it is symptomatic of how politics has changed in Bangladesh in the decades since the mid-1970s.

And Sheikh Hasina has changed as well. The old caution, the careful, almost timid responses to questions have given way to a more formidable

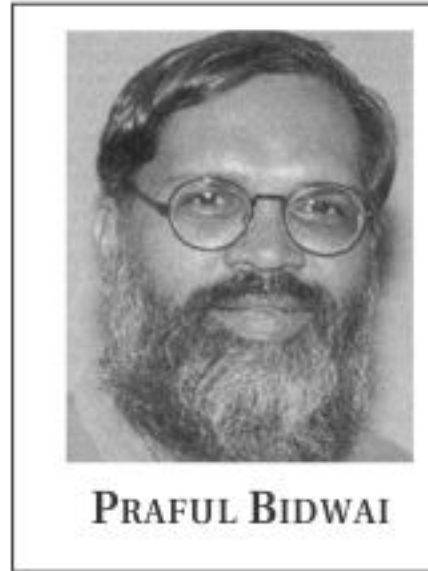
personality in national politics. The common touch which once defined Sher-e-Bangla, Moulana Bhashani and Bangabandhu is now an underpinning of her politics. She gathers widows and orphans in an embrace in all the sincerity of emotion. When she asks business leaders if they are treating their workers well, it is in the full knowledge that the working class does not exactly happen to be living in a paradise of happiness. Her sense of humour remains remarkable and so does her pulse on politics at the grassroots. She is at her best when she lets spontaneity take over, when formal speeches are put aside.

At sixty five, Sheikh Hasina has transformed herself into one of the two most powerful political leaders in Bangladesh's history, the other being Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. You may agree with her politics or you may take serious issue with her, but you cannot quite dismiss the reality of her place in history. There are all the dangers she lives with, risks that also vicariously confront those who have traditionally kept faith with the spirit of 1971. Which is why she now needs to bring together all those forces, intellectual and social, that once sustained her father's politics, in a wider coalition. She has brought Bangabandhu's killers to justice. She has caused the war crimes trials to commence, to the relief of the country. So far so good.

In a larger sense, though, Sheikh Hasina needs to reach out to the whole country, across the spectrum, if she means to change it for the better. And then, of course, will come the pivotal question in national politics: after Sheikh Hasina, who?

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PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN



PRAFUL BIDWAI

the ruling United Progressive Alliance and the Congress. This didn't greatly cheer up the party, which was beset by another crisis, caused this time by its third largest ally, Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party.

The Congress had little choice but to field Mr. Gandhi in a more visible role ahead of the general election in 2014. With Mr. Pranab Mukherjee's election as India's president, and Ms. Sonia Gandhi's illness, the Congress faces a leadership void.

It cannot project Dr. Manmohan Singh as the prime ministerial candidate again -- although that might please many industrialists.

Rahul Gandhi has concentrated on trying to rejuvenate the Congress by "democratising" its youth wing -- largely unsuccessfully, and with poor election results in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. He must now take on ministerial responsibilities and develop an understanding of the complexities of governance.

Challenges to the UPA are mounting as the economy slows down, investment slackens, and Right-wing pressure grows for abandoning interventions to empower the poor, and pursuing aggressive neoliberal policies such as freeing foreign capital entry into retail, dismantling labour and environmental protections, and privatising public sector enterprises.

Real leadership lies in refusing to capitulate to elite pressure and delivering what India's underprivileged people need for a humane, dignified existence.

Dr. Singh has repeatedly failed the test. He has thwarted or diluted several sensible proposals made by progressive scholars, grassroots activists, and the UPA's own National Advisory Council, comprising civil society representatives.

These include a food security Bill, minimum wages, old-age pensions for the poor, and universal good-quality healthcare and education. Much of this can be done by using a modest fraction of the government's revenue income, which has nearly quadrupled since 2004. Dr. Singh's refusal to do this is alienating underprivileged people

Another source of the Congress' troubles is its allies. Mr. Pawar staked

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his claim to the cabinet's number two position after Mr. Mukherjee's elevation by threatening to quit the UPA and offering it "outside support."

Although Mr. Pawar has cited issues like governance failures and the NCP's exclusion from decision-making, his real grievances lie in the frustration of his prime ministerial ambitions and inability to acquire political clout.

He privately complains that after having served under stalwarts like Indira Gandhi, he had to play second fiddle to Rajiv Gandhi, and would now have to defer to Rahul who is younger than his daughter.

This is inevitable. The NCP only holds nine Lok Sabha seats, to the Congress's 207. Mr. Pawar's greater grievance pertains to his native Maharashtra. There, his colleagues have come under critical scrutiny from Congress Chief Minister Prithviraj Chavan for corruption in land development, irrigation and numerous other contracts.

The NCP is less a party than a money-

making machine. It has long looted the exchequer through kickbacks in defence and other deals. It drove Air-India into the ground and coddled private airlines. In Maharashtra, it has used lucrative portfolios like finance, urban development, power and irrigation to run mega-scams.

Over the past decade, Maharashtra has spent Rs.70,000 crores on irrigation, but its physical achievement is worth less than one-fifth of the expenditure. Thousands of crores have been similarly diverted to the land mafia and builders in the name of "slum redevelopment" on prime property.

The posh Lavasa township near

Pune, in which Mr. Pawar's friends and his daughter are involved, is fraught with illegalities, including destruction of virgin rainforests and watersheds, and tampering with land records.

Prithviraj Chavan, who has a clean reputation, was sent to Maharashtra to clear up the mess after the Adarsh Society scam. He has put "a clamp" on dubious real estate projects. He has set up a Housing Regulatory Authority and brought in laws to redress public grievances against builders. He has also ordered a white paper on irrigation.

This has blocked the NCP's money-making avenues. The NCP maliciously says this is thwarting "development" and threatened a walkout from the UPA.

The six-day standoff over this was pure brinkmanship. The NCP couldn't have quit the UPA without its government collapsing in Maharashtra, the only state it rules.

The NCP cannot retain its strength in Maharashtra unless it fights the next

state elections in alliance with other parties -- if not the Congress, then the Bharatiya Janata Party or one or both factions of the Shiv Sena.

The big obstacles to the latter alliance would not be principles, but political realities. No principles like secularism deterred Mr. Pawar in 1978 from defecting from the Congress and joining hands with Hindu-communal parties. He recently fought municipal elections in alliance with them.

But the Assembly elections are two years away. The BJP isn't particularly well placed for them. Despite some symbolic personal gestures of a thaw, the two Sena factions remain steeped in rivalry.

That's why Mr. Pawar called off his "revolt" and tamely settled for a UPA "coordination committee" at the centre and a Congress-NCP committee in Maharashtra. Through the second, he will press for the withdrawal of some worthy measures Chief Minister Chavan has taken against NCP corruption. If it has any sense, the Congress should strongly resist such pressure.

Mr. Pawar personifies degeneration from politics with a purpose to unbounded opportunism and cynicism. He started out as a dynamic young politician. In 1972-74, when Maharashtra was gripped by a terrible drought, he was instrumental in extending the recently launched Employment Guarantee Scheme to the affected areas. He used sugarcane growers' cooperatives to promote education.

The cooperatives are now defunct or mired in murderous rivalry. Mr. Pawar has evolved into India's richest and most landed politician.

He is India's agriculture minister, but hasn't bothered to visit Punjab, which faces acute agrarian distress. Why, he didn't even go to India's farmer-suicide capital Vidarbha, in his own Maharashtra, until Dr. Singh did. He doesn't deserve even an iota of sympathy.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.