

## No let-up in Limon hounding

### The state should intervene

THE Limon saga of relentless persecution by a state agency is a festering wound on our national conscience. It inflicts a deep scar on the state's obligations for the rule of law, human rights, and protection of a citizen against abuse of power by an agency of the government. In utter disregard of denunciation by civil society leaders, National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) chief, media commentators, vendetta against Limon shows no sign of abating. On the contrary, it takes on newer forms and intensity.

First, they had crippled the boy in one leg by shooting and then filed two cases against him, one for possessing illegal arms and the other for obstructing Rab members in discharging their duties and opening fire on them. The cases awaiting trial in Jhalatakhí court for a long time. As if that was not enough of an ordeal, Rajapur police in a report to Jhalatakhí court on the case filed by Limon's mother against six Rab personnel said 'they found no evidence that Rab shot Limon or attempted to kill him'.

Limon's fault is why his family dared seek justice against some members of the elite force, why has his fate evoked such outpouring of public sympathies and outcry? The more strident became public reaction to the victimisation of the innocent, more vigorous has been the effort of his tormentors not to let him off the hooks. Charge has been framed under juvenile crime prevention act against him in an old case lodged more than a year before. Even though DG Rab last year admitted that Limon was innocent, why is he being pursued on one pretext or another?

Then came the Eid Day attack on Limon's house allegedly by a Rab informant. A follow-up story in this paper brings to light alleged collusion of the elite force with criminals-turned-informants of Rab. A whole bunch of elements are arrayed against Limon.

All that the poor crippled college boy needs is to be left alone. We think it is time the government put an end to any further victimisation of Limon. If the state fails to protect its citizen from one of its own agencies and secure his future, who he/she would turn to? There is a danger in the trend that must be vigorously rolled back.

## Healthcare spending

### Public health must be given priority

THE World Health Organization's recently published World Health Statistics 2012 has found that Bangladesh spends less than the minimum amount of 44 USD or Tk 3,608 per person per year on healthcare. Among the SAARC countries, this puts Bangladesh with its 21 USD per person in a position only better than Pakistan, and in a much worse position than even war-torn Afghanistan.

The situation is not quite dire -- yet. While in terms of percentage of the total budget, allocation to the health sector has gone down from 5.4 percent in the fiscal year 2011-2012 to 4.9 percent in 2012-2013, due to the size of the increased budget, the actual Tk 93.55 billion is Tk 0.10 billion more than the last financial year. The government has recently recruited more people into the health sector and established community clinics across the country.

The spending pattern needs to be reprioritised to a certain extent. Money spent on disease prevention and awareness raising on health issues will have to be increased also the family planning and reproductive health deserve a greater funnelling of resources.

It is worthwhile to note that people are having to spend more from their own pockets for healthcare -- 64 percent, according to 2007 statistics.

The worst affected are, obviously, the poor, who not only lack access to private medical services, but who end up having to pay more from their own pockets for what is often sub-standard public medical care. It is not enough to allocate greater funds to the health sector; their balanced distribution and effective utilisation according to public need must be ensured to benefit the people, who

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

- August 28
- 1521

The Ottoman Turks occupy Belgrade.
- 1542

Turkish-Portuguese War (1538-1557) Battle of Wofla: the Portuguese are scattered, their leader Christovão da Gama is captured and later executed.
- 1916

World War I: Italy declares war on Germany.
- 1924

The Georgian opposition stages the August Uprising against the Soviet Union.
- 1931

France and Soviet Union sign a treaty of non-aggression.
- 1990

Iraq declares Kuwait to be its newest province.
- 1991

Ukraine declares its independence from the Soviet Union.
- 1991

Collapse of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev resigns as General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party.
- 1998

Pakistan's National Assembly passes a constitutional amendment to make the "Qur'an and Sunnah" the "supreme law" but the bill is defeated in the Senate.

# Going to war over water



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

water and sanitation to be a basic human right. Yet two years on, governments around the world have yet to come up with concrete long-term policies that could help reverse decades- old neglect to water. More importantly, where river systems cross national boundaries the lack of regional cooperation on the sharing of precious water remains on the political backburner. While nations have gone to war over territory, water too soon could become the bone of contention leading to major conflicts in some of the most densely populated regions of the world. Such sentiments have already been voiced. In March, 2012, British Energy Secretary Ed Davey shared his concerns with global policymakers that "water wars could be a real prospect in coming years as states struggle with the effects of climate change, growing demand for water and declining state of energy."

Water remains a finite resource. Over usage due primarily to consumption by an ever exploding global population and dependence on H2O for agriculture, industry, mining has helped dwindle supply of our reserves for freshwater. Our overindulgence in wasting water for recreation purposes takes a whole new meaning when one considers the alternative uses of the precious resource. For instance, growing a

ton of wheat requires 1,000 tons of water; conversely, watering the world's golf courses requires nearly 79 million tons of water a day. Such extravagance seems irrational especially when faced with the stark realities of climate change. Glaciers are melting and lakes, rivers and natural aquifers continue to dwindle. Alarm bells are being sounded everywhere. According to data published by the OECD, nearly half the world's population (47%) will be living in areas of high water stress by 2030.

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*Little wonder that conflicts seem imminent in a number of regions in the world. And as we enter into the uncertainty of freshwater supplies, nations have resorted to dam building giving rise to cross-border tension.*

water supplies, nations have resorted to dam building giving rise to cross-border tension. China undoubtedly leads the pack of dam builders. It has completed some 10 dams on the nearly 3,000 km long Brahmaputra River and is in the process of building another 18. Potential repercussion of such building could prove disastrous for both North-East India and Bangladesh. With plans to damming nearly 10 of the mightiest rivers that flow from the world's largest water tank, the Tibetan plateau, China hopes to replenish some 6,000 lakes that have gone dry. The damming activity in the Upper Mekong for purposes of hydroelectricity is

another worrying sign for lower riparian countries of South East Asia including Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Cambodia.

Indeed China is not alone in diverting precious water away to meet its growing needs. India and Pakistan have long been locked in dispute over water. The Indus Water Treaty (1960), overseen by the World Bank, divided six major river systems between the two nations. Pakistan received the Indus, Jhelum and Chenab, while India got the Sutlej, the Beas and Ravi. With nearly 50% of the population of Pakistan involved in agriculture and more than 90% of the country dependent on water of the Indus,

tensions are constantly on the high with allegations that India is diverting away precious water by building an upstream dam. With India suffering from massive electricity crunch, it is little wonder that hydroelectricity looms large on its agenda. Yet, the construction and planned construction of such projects on the Chenam and Jhelum rivers has Pakistan on edge.

Given such high stakes, it is little wonder that "there is definitely potential for conflict based on water, particularly if we are looking to the year 2050, when there could be considerable water scarcity in India and Pakistan," says Michael Kugelman, South Asia Associate at

the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington. "Populations will continue to grow. There will be more pressure on supply. Factor in climate change and faster glacial melt ... That means much more will be at stake. So you could have a perfect storm which conceivably could be some sort of trigger."

While all indications point to a bleak future, there are ways the threat of a "waterless" world may be mitigated. Communities across the world are already taking action. Bellavista is a remote hillside village located outside Lima, Peru. In winter it is eclipsed by dense fog that rolls in from the Pacific Ocean. Locals with the help of German conservationists have found a unique way to catching all that moisture. Using multilayered nets to capture fog and condense its fine droplets into water. Prior to this programme residents had to spend up to 15% of their earnings to truck their water up from Lima. Now the fog generates tens of thousands of gallons of water a year which helps residents to sustain 700 young trees and ten farm gardens year round. Such practical solutions exist that allow us to meet our freshwater needs today while preserving nature's ability to meet those growing needs. Diplomacy must play a greater role in averting conflicts between nations and communities, while emerging technology such as desalinisation need to be supported by governments that must make access to water a national security priority.

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## PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

# Behind Assam's ethnic violence



PRAFUL BIDWAI

THE number of people displaced by Assam's ethnic violence since July 20 is about to cross the 5-lakh mark, making this India's largest internal migration, comparable to the cross-border influx during Partition or the Bangladesh War.

Thousands from the Northeast who migrated to mainland cities, especially Bangalore, have fled to their home states, causing one of India's greatest humanitarian crises.

This panic migration was triggered by rumours of impending hate attacks conveyed through bulk SMSs and emails based on morphed images. Some of these depict Muslims being targeted in Burma or by people presumed to be from India's Northeast because of their physical features, racially stereotyped as "Mongoloid."

The SMSs' purveyors are cynically capitalising on ignorance in mainland India about numerous different ethnic-linguistic groups like the Bodos and Mizos, Khasis and Assamese, and Meiteis and Nagas. The motive is to instigate physical attacks on them.

Equally pernicious are attempts to falsely equate Hyderabad (Sindh) with Hyderabad (Deccan). A mass mailing accuses Congress-ruled Andhra of permitting "Muslims to celebrate Pakistan's 65<sup>th</sup> independence day" in the second Hyderabad, bringing ignominy to India.

Some Pakistani extremists could well be behind this SMS campaign, hyperbolically termed "cyber-war" or "psy-jihad." But according to Indian security agencies, a large majority of the 300-odd suspect websites/pages are India-based.

More important, mails such as that quoted above suggest the involvement of Hindutva groups. This is borne out by the inflammatory statements issued daily by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Bharatiya Janata Party and their student-union associate Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad on Assam's clashes, with the Indian

state looking on passively.

Here's manufacture of panic through easily accessible communication means and tools like Photoshop, which can be effortlessly manipulated to morph pictures. The worst culprits are probably not social media websites, accessed by a relatively small minority, but SMSs which can be widely disseminated.

Groups like the RSS are past-masters at using whisper campaigns, rumours and disinformation to provoke communal violence. The Sangh is clearly trying to expand its relatively small base in the Northeast and promote communal-religious polarisation in India.

In the present case, state governments abjectly failed to protect Northeastern migrants against chauvinist and racist attacks. Instead, to their shame, they put people en-masse on trains leaving Bangalore.

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The engineering of this migration showed that the authorities abdicated their responsibility towards vulnerable citizens, and that many Indians don't trust the government to defend their life and limb against hate crimes.

In BJP-ruled Karnataka, the RSS is on a rampage. Recently, many Northeastern people were targeted in racist attacks and sexual harassment in Bangalore.

However, what about the violence in Assam? The death toll in the Bodo-Muslim clashes in the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD) area of Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon and Chirang, and in adjoining Dhubri, is nearing 80 amidst massive displacement.

There's very little clarity about the proximate causes of the conflict, barring a tussle over a sectional Muslim attempt to permanently occupy land near Kokrajhar for Eid prayers. The

national media has not bothered to report in depth on the situation. Reportedly, none of Assam's numerous TV channels has an Outdoor Broadcasting van.

This speaks of colossal callousness within the mainstream towards a region that every government and national party claims belongs irrevocably to India, even more integrally than Jammu and Kashmir.

Few in India comprehend the absurdity of claiming such territorial ownership when they minimise the injustices, violence and bloodshed heaped upon the Northeast, not least through draconian laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, which gives impunity for outright murder.

This monumental incomprehension hasn't prevented self-appointed "experts" -- who lack even nominal acquaintance with the Northeast --

sions too attribute the violence to rising illegal Muslim migration from "dirt-poor" Bangladesh.

However, this runs against facts. For one, Bangladesh has recently recorded higher human development indices than India, thus weakening the "push factor" for migration to one of India's poorer pockets. For another, better border fencing has reduced the influx of Bangladeshis to a trickle.

For a third, Kokrajhar's Muslim population only increased from 17 to 20% of the total between 1971 and 2001. This isn't alarming. The provisional 2011 census figures, which don't contain a religion-wise break-up, put the decadal growth in the district's entire population at a mere 5.2%, compared to 14.5% in 1991-2001 (and 16.9% for Assam in 2001-2011).

Considering that the Bodos have a political monopoly over BTAD and therefore no motive to move out, this relative decrease can only be explained by non-Bodo out-migration, especially Bengali-speaking Muslims'.

Underway in BTAD is competition between two production systems: the Bodos's subsistence single-crop economy, and the Muslims' hard-work-based commercially-oriented multi-crop economy. This is allowing the Muslims to buy land.

Another source of conflict is over political representation in the larger Western Assam region, where Muslims have made gains using democratic instruments. The Bodos drove them out forcibly -- in 1992-92, 1996 and 2010, but failed this time around. The Bodos form only 20% of BTAD's population and don't enjoy social-economic hegemony.

In the last analysis, the culprit here is the Indian government's misguided policy of creating "homelands" for groups of Northeastern tribals even when they are a small proportion of an area's population. Rectifying this approach demands a broad vision, which is missing.

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