

TRANS-BOUNDARY RIVER SHARING

Experts for equity, transparency

TAWFIQUE ALI, *back from Chiang Rai, Thailand*

Trans-boundary river management must be transparent and equitable for the communities traditionally dependent on a common basin for life and livelihood, said international negotiators at a conference in Thailand last Wednesday.

Management is not mere equal water sharing. It is about food security, energy generation and ecology conservation, they said, calling for river basin organisations to be inclusive in nature.

International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) organised the conference, styled "hydro-diplomacy" as a tool for cross-border water sharing, in Chiang Rai city to find practical solutions to international river sharing issues.

A total of 54 rivers, including three major basins of Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna, encompassing a 1.75 million sq km area and 620 million people, flow across India and Bangladesh.

The 30-year treaty of 1996 between Bangladesh and India deals only with the Ganges water sharing while a draft deal with India proposing equal share of Teesta water was shelved last year following reservations by the West Bengal state government.

Rivers have become political entities, once cradling people and today becoming flowing arguments and fluid acronyms, said a former West Bengal governor, Gopalkrishna Gandhi, at the conference.

International river basins are home to nearly half of the world population.

Rivers are vital for water, food and energy security. Livelihoods of those dependent on river systems and biodiversity are indispensable in river management, said Prof Torkil Jonch Clausen, senior advisor to Global Water Partnership.

Arab Water Council Director Prof Khaled M Abu Zeid said only a handful of shared rivers were governed by joint treaties while over 145 countries share about

261 rivers.

A universally acceptable legal mechanism to manage such river waters is still missing. Only 27 countries, since 1997, ratified the UN convention on the law of non-navigational uses of international watercourses, he said.

The convention requires ratification by at least 35 countries to come into force.

IUCN has also initiated an Indo-Bangla dialogue, "Ecosystem for Life", aiming at understanding food, livelihood, water security and climate change, particularly in the three aforementioned basins.

Another IUCN initiative, The Mekong Water Dialogues, brings Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam to work for livelihood security and conservation of human health and ecosystem in the trans-boundary Mekong river system.

It aims at forging inclusive decision-making with the government, gender and indigenous representation and also with inclusion of private sector players and the civil society.

But China and Myanmar, territories of which constitute the Mekong region, are not yet part of the dialogues.

Talking to The Daily Star on the conference's sidelines, Subrata Mukharjee, a minister for rural development of the West Bengal government, said his government opposed the Teesta deal as it was not "officially" consulted with them beforehand.

However, speaking at the conference, Subrata justified the opposition, saying a crisis would be created in his state's northern region during the dry season if the water was shared equally.

Teesta's resources and capacity should be jointly studied with independent experts before striking a deal, which, he said, might be a little difficult but was not impossible.

Nile Basin Initiative CEO Teferra Beyene; Mekong River Commission CEO Hans Guttman; and Lena Salame, a programme coordinator of Unesco; spoke at the conference, moderated by World Water Council Governor Dr Jerome Delli Priscoli.



The national committee for restoration of the 1972 constitution observes a half-day mass hunger strike in front of Jatiya Press Club in the capital yesterday marking the 40th anniversary of the formulation of Bangladesh's constitution.

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Mr. Akhtaruzzaman Chowdhury [1945-2012]
valiant freedom fighter, MP, Past President, FBCCI
eminent industrialist and Founder Director & Chairman of UCBL

We are deeply shocked and saddened at the demise of Mr. Akhtaruzzaman Chowdhury. May Allah give strength and consolation to his bereaved family members.

May you rest in peace.



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