

# Tree-cutting galore in Lalmonirhat

*Administration turns a blind eye*

WHILE environmental activists and media scream away about environmental degradation, we have stood by as silent spectators to the horror of 500 trees felled along the Mogholhat-Durgapur road at Durgapur village in Aditmari upazila under Lalmonirhat district in recent days.

It is disheartening to say the least that ruling party men in collaboration with unscrupulous members of local administration have carried out the misdeed at no less than five upazilas of Lalmonirhat. Giving contracts for cutting of trees is a normal administrative function. What is not normal is the open flouting of terms of contract whereby a great many more trees are cut down for profit. The shocking part of this woeful tale is that the trees being decimated are precious ones like Mahogany that apparently fetch as much as Tk2.5million a piece on the market.

Unbridled profiteering appears to have become the norm of the day—a practice that seems to have become commonplace in every part of the country. And this is evident more than ever as district authorities turn a deaf ear to complaints from the local populace. Trees and forests are a natural guard against natural calamities such as floods. Such folly cannot be condoned but it is in a land where the lure of cash is corrupting and corrupting absolutely.

# Hall-Mark probe report not to be made public

*We strongly oppose the decision*

AFTER an exhaustive three-year probe by the Parliamentary Committee on Finance into the Hall-Mark group financial scandal that involved siphoning off an estimated Tk2,668crore from Sonali Bank, the report may now never see light of day. Apparently the finance ministry-related parliamentary committee is of the opinion that since its findings are identical to that of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) investigating Hall-Mark scam, there is no need to disclose the findings for public scrutiny.

We strongly disagree with the decision and condemn such mentality. Regardless of what the committee or for that matter, the ministry of finance may think or believe the Hall-Mark saga was by far the single largest financial scandal involving a State-owned bank in the history of Bangladesh. Following the public outcry and subsequent investigations by various bodies including the central bank, attempts were made to track down the missing billions. It is ironic that investigations found trace of a mere Tk200-300cr and the paper trail went cold on the bulk of siphoned cash.

This money is public money, and the public has every right to know what is in the parliamentary committee probe report and who the real culprits behind this scam were. If indeed the probe committee's findings are the same as that of ACC's, there ought to be no problem disclosing the facts. Until we are willing to break this despicable culture of sweeping under the carpet public inquiry reports, such scams will continue to occur. We earnestly hope the powers-that-be will display some moral courage and break out of the tradition of secrecy to instil transparency in governance and restore public faith in the system.

# Gems in ashes

M A KASHEM

WHEREVER you find ashes, search there, and you may find priceless gems. In other words, even in tons of negativity one may find hidden positivity that may inspire one to move forward. This is the essence of an old adage goes in Bangla.

Apparently Bangladesh is a country of so many problems. We are passing through a very unpredictable time because of the political unrest. Smooth functioning of the parliament is being hampered due to the absence of the opposition. We are losing many working days in the name of hartal. Violent street protests and demonstrations usually lead to the loss of valuable lives and properties. Corruption is another big feature of our problem list. More than four decades have passed since our independence. Yet successive governments cannot find a peaceful way to transfer power. In addition, adversity out of climate change due to global warming is appearing as a new threat. A lot of people still are suffering from extreme poverty. Forty-one percent of our children are identified as stunted. This is an over populated country. Our cultivable land is very limited and it is shrinking day-by-day. Population is increasing with an alarming rate. It appears as a big concern when it comes to food security. In recent times climate change poses the bigger challenge. Experts suggest that part of the country may go under water if the sea level rises. To make a long story short these are some of the very difficult problems we are facing now-a-days.

Even then can we feel happy? Is there any reason to be satisfied? The answer is yes.

We find rays of hope, because these problems can be resolved, if we act together. There are other problems that looming overhead.

Despite all such adversities we are confident that BRRI developed varieties will be able to meet our farmers' need in the days to come also as it was in the past. And our commitments to the nation could be fulfilled in a better way if we could avail all-out cooperation from all of our national and international partners as well as patrons. We remember the excellent partnership between US and Bangladesh that has been very effective and meaningful.

THE WRITER ISTechnical Editor and Head, Publications and Public Relations Division, Bangladesh Rice Research Institute.

# Our police in perspective

STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

*Faced with recurrent peasant rebellions and mounting political resistance, the police became the foremost tool of repression in India, with the colonial state retaining total monopoly over its coercive power.*

SEEN through the lens of cynical observers, it would appear that the police are destined to act out the role of permanent villain in the wider canvas of our increasingly confrontational political scenario. Admittedly, this is not a desirable profile of a vital organ of the state, particularly when demands for good governance are made in public interest. Under such circumstances, it might be in public good to venture into the origin and growth of our police force from a historical perspective.

When the East India Company took over diwani in 1765, the Mughal police system was under the control of the faujdars, who were in charge of their sarkars or rural districts; the kotwals were in charge of towns, while the village watchmen were paid and controlled by the zamindars. This system continued for some time under the authority of Muhammad Reza Khan acting as the Naib Nazim with his station at Murshidabad. But the old system could hardly function effectively, as the growing power of the Company had thoroughly undermined the authority of the nawab.

Crime rates began spiraling upward after the famine of 1770, and the general state of 'law and order' declined day by day with an alarming rise in the rate of crime against property. For the Company officials, like other departments, the police administration too seemed to be in need of European supervision, as every crime was a direct affront to their authority. The faujdari system continued with minor modifications until 1781, when the faujdars were finally replaced by English magistrates. The zamindars retained their police duties, but were made subservient to the magistrates.

The above limited reform of Warren Hastings could not solve the problem, as the establishments of the magistrates proved to be too inadequate for the purpose, while the

zamindars abused the system and freely took advantage of its weaknesses. So Lord Cornwallis in 1793 decided to divest zamindars of their policing duties, and instead divided the districts into thanas or units of police jurisdiction of twenty to thirty square miles, each placed under a new officer called daroga, who was to be appointed and supervised by the magistrates.

The daroga thus became a new instrument of control for the Company's government in the diwani provinces, or as the peasants looked at them, as the local representatives of the "aura and authority of the Company Bahadur." A new and alien element in the countryside, they could hardly ignore the powerful local-landed magnates, who retained much of their extra-legal coercive powers and in most cases made alliances with them.

By the nineteenth century the daroga-zamindar nexus thus emerged as a new instrument of coercion and oppression in Bengal rural life. But on the other hand, when the resourceful contestants for power in the countryside, the zamindars and the planters, both having posses of mercenaries or lathiayals at their command, got embroiled in fierce battles for territories, the ill-equipped and poorly provided darogas stood as helpless onlookers.

The daroga system was extended to Madras in 1802 and the tehsildari system to the Ceded and Conquered upper Provinces in 1803 and 1804 respectively. But everywhere the system produced devastating results because, as Thomas Munro diagnosed, it was "not founded in the usages of the country."

The daroga system was formally abolished in 1812, and the supervision of the village police was vested in the collector, who was now responsible for revenue, police and magisterial functions at the same time. This extreme concentration of power led to

other problems. The subordinates in the revenue department, who were now in charge of revenue collection as well as supervision of rural policing, became the new agents of oppression and coercion.

In Bengal, where there was no subordinate establishment in the Collectorate offices, because of the Permanent Settlement, the darogas were retained and allowed to perform police duties, although after 1817 they were placed under a more regulatory regime closely supervised by the district magistrates. But such patchy reforms were hardly satisfactory and the colonial state clearly needed an appropriate and uniform police system that would assert its authority, secure property and ensure the introduction of its version of the 'rule of law' throughout the empire.

Sir Charles Napier in 1843 discarded the previous practice of trying to adapt the indigenous systems to the needs of the colonial state, created a separate police department with its own officers, following the model of the Royal Irish Constabulary, which he found to be ideally suited to the colonial condition.

It needs to be mentioned here that while English political opinion remained ideologically averse to the idea of a professional police force, it was in Ireland, in view of the growing sectarian and peasant movements, that a regular police force was created in 1787 as an apparatus of colonial intervention.

The revolt of 1857 had shaken the foundations of British rule and had made it more conscious of the need of effective machinery for collecting information and policing the empire. The Police Commission appointed in 1860 provided for a basic structure of a police establishment for the Indian empire that was enacted in the Police Act of 1861. And that structure, with only minor adjustments, remained unchanged for the next century of British rule.

Distrustful of the Indian subordinates and subservient to the civilian authorities, the Indian police system was tellingly reflective of its colonial nature. Although not a police state in a conventional sense, a "Police Raj" gradually emerged between the revolt of 1857 and the transfer of power in 1947. Faced with recurrent peasant rebellions and mounting political resistance, the police became the foremost tool of repression in India, with the colonial state retaining total monopoly over its coercive power. Regrettably, the state of affairs has not significantly altered for the better since then.

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# Man-made disaster: Policy and practice

KHANDKER SADIA ARAFIN

IN recent years, man-made disasters have become common news in Bangladesh. Since Bangladesh offers the cheapest labour in the world, it attracts the investors to establish labour extensive industries like readymade garment, leather and footwear, ship breaking and ship building. Garment factories are the major preference as their contribution to the total GDP is 10.5% and around 80% to national export earnings. Besides, this sector provides direct employment to about 3.5 million people, most of whom are female. Bangladesh enjoys the GSP that ensures easy access to the US, Canada and EU markets. Our major buyers are Wal-Mart, K-Mart, Reebok, Nike, Gap, PVH, Perry Ellis, Tesco, Carrefour, Kids Headquarters, Inditex (Zara), Li & Fung, H & M, JC Penny, Marks & Spencer, C & A from Europe, USA and other developed countries.

In view of the fact that readymade garment industry is not considered to be heavy industry, proper and sufficient care is not given to its vulnerability to fire and building collapse, which are the common industrial accidents here. The data say that 130 workers died and 950 workers were injured in 2005 from fire incidents only. Since 1990, more than 700 people have lost their valuable lives in different garment factory fires. A shocking situation was caused when a building collapsed in Savar, causing the death of about a thousand people and wounding a significant number. The US, Canada and EU countries have started pushing Bangladesh to ensure workplace safety to get more investment in garments industries and apparel exports to those countries.

Though fire is a common occurrence in many countries, the number of casualties is higher in Bangladesh than in any other country. The main reason for so death is suffocation during the blaze. Insufficient emergency exits, inadequate training on the how to use the fire extinguishers, no emergency alarm system, inaccessible or locked main gate, irregular safety drills, and lack of awareness of the owners and workers alike worsen the situation.

In case of man-made disasters, especially of industrial accidents, the government has formulated a number of policies to cope with different stages of disaster. Thus, the rules exist in the country but the problem remains in their implementation. A good number of industries definitely follow the fire-safety measures, though there are some RMG factories that are reluctant to follow the measures stringently. One of the prerequisites of export of RMG to EU and USA markets is to follow the measures fully. But the thoughts of many garments owners' are centred on making profits only.

Now we are going to correlate our practice with the different stages of disaster management. Theoretically, the first stage of disaster management is 'mitigation.' The government has formulated National Building Code, 1993, which

clearly lays out the safety and security measures for industrial sector establishments. However, non-compliance of building code is the major problem with the industry owners, and the supervising authority also turns a blind eye in this regard. The implementing authority is diversified in the code, resulting in lack of monitoring and increasing the transformation of residential buildings into industrial ones.

The second stage is 'preparedness,' which includes disaster prevention drill and practice of other disaster prevention measures. Fire protection drill is common in practice as this is one of the prerequisites of export to the EU and USA markets. Nevertheless, the composite disaster prevention drill is merely practiced in different industries. Therefore, the garments' workers are not aware about diverse effects of disaster that causes panic and results in higher number of casualties. Besides, free phoning facility and fire alarm system are yet to be developed in Bangladesh.

The third and penultimate stage is 'response,' which includes both from the government and from industry owners. In practice, the response from the ministries is prompt, however, lack of co-ordination between different ministries sometimes slows down the response. Lack of modern equipment and well trained fire fighters hinders the quick response to a disaster. Narrow roads and lack of evacuation space often prevent the rescue team from getting quick access to the place of the disaster.

The fourth and last but not the least stage of disaster management is recovery. Usually recovery is done by Fire Service and Civil Defense Force (FSCDF). In recent years, rejuvenation of this force has started, though the man-power is not yet enough to face a medium level disaster. It also needs modernisation in terms of equipment and use.

In a developed country like Japan, the policy makers revise the existing policy in case of any natural or man-made disaster after checking the gaps within the existing policy in different stages of disaster management. Though disasters come with new dimensions they cause huge loss of lives and properties, the Japanese ensure that there are no more casualties due to the same gaps. Sharing experience with the rescue team may help the government to chalk out the list of the essential equipments that need to be purchased immediately. If the experience of Spectrum Garments collapse rescue works had been evaluated, it would have helped the FSCDF and other rescue teams to set a more effective strategy to rescue more lives.

As nobody knows when disaster will strike, we may consider the necessity of sharing their experience to establish a man-made disaster management system to guarantee the safety of the workers, ensure more investment in Bangladesh and increase exports to the developed world.

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# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## Slave labour!

After the Rana Plaza collapse, Pope Francis condemned the working conditions of Bangladesh garment workers as "slave labour." We have learnt that BGMEA has sent a letter to the Pope in protest against his comments on the country's garment workers stating that there is no slavery system in Bangladesh and the laws of the country also do not allow any slavery.

However, the Pope's comment had a deep impact on the minds of people throughout the world. So, BGMEA's protest was all right. But the fact is, garment workers' situation in our country may not be defined as pure slavery but it is almost near to slavery. We must remember that the nation will not progress by hiding its people's sufferings from the outside world.

Mobarak Ali  
Gopibagh, Dhaka

## Rice bran oil

It was good to learn from your business page on April 14 that a large plant to produce rice bran oil is being installed at the Ishwardi EPZ by a Japan-Bangladesh joint venture. It should be on stream by early next year if political violence is stopped. This plant is expected to produce around 270,000 tonnes of rice bran oil annually. Although not the first plant in Bangladesh, it will be the largest. It will also produce other bio-chemicals needed for our food and drug industry. The main raw material is rice bran, produced all over the country when paddy is milled. Presently, it is mostly used as poultry feed. This venture will produce edible oil, quite a bit of which we now import.

Engr. S. A. Mansoor  
Dhaka

## Solving the CTG issue

Recently the daily Prothom Alo conducted a poll which shows that ninety percent of the people want a caretaker government to conduct the next parliamentary election. Caretaker government system was once acceptable to all the political parties. If this demand of the opposition is accepted, then all the destructive activities will end and the nation will heave a sigh of relief. All the parties are equally responsible for the present situation of the country. If both the major parties become cordial, there should not be any barrier in solving the CTG issue.

Engr. Md. Aminul Hoque  
East Rampur, Dhaka

## \$ 15 billion FC reserves

While rejoicing over the \$15 billion FC reserves, the powers that be give most credit to exporters, especially garments. This is not all true, because the recent front page story in The Daily Star and other newspapers said that the owners of garment factories say that they hardly make any profit as all the cream is skimmed off by the buyers. This leaves little or nothing for the garment owners after paying less than minimum wages to the millions of workers, mostly women!

The real heroes of the \$15 billion mark are not the garment factory owners, but the millions who work abroad in the harshest of environments and live in conditions that beggar the imagination. What can these heroes expect when they come home—discriminatory treatment at the airport and mugging en-route to their homes?

Sikander Ahmed  
Gulshan, Dhaka

## Politics of fraud and intimidation

After assuming the responsibility of running the affairs of the state, the government has barely fulfilled the promises made to the people prior to election, thereby committing fraud. When people stage demonstration protesting such failures by the government, the regime in power suppresses such demonstrations with force, inflicting terror and fear in the minds of the people, thereby committing intimidation.

I wonder with dismay whether there will ever be an exploitation-free society in Bangladesh, where the politicians will fulfil their election pledges and work for the welfare of the nation, and not from their selfish motives.

Saleh Mohammad Ayub  
Houston, Texas, USA

## Comments on news report, "No non-partisan polls time govt," published on May 16, 2013

### Abir Hasan

It would be better for Sheikh Hasina to change her own opinion, rather than trying to change the opinion of 170 million people.

### Ali Ahmed

The last CTG made great a mistake by releasing all the criminal politicians out of jail and letting them participate in the election. So, another chance should be given to CTG to correct its previous mistakes.

### Sherlock Bongos

A free, fair and credible election is still possible without a caretaker government.

### A reader

No incumbent government has so far won any election under a neutral caretaker government. So why will Sheikh Hasina restore the caretaker government system?