

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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DHAKA THURSDAY MAY 30, 2013

Alarming depletion of forests

Strike at the root of impunity culture

A 7-year exhaustive study conducted by the Comptroller and Auditor General on the unlawful grabbing of forest land has come up with some startling facts. The value of illegally occupied forestland nationwide is worth Tk 2,74,902 crore. Putting that in perspective, it is roughly double the national budget for the fiscal year 2010-11. To state things are bad would be somewhat an understatement.

The sad reality is that despite having information about the incessant clearing of forest land, authorities are powerless to do something, especially in the face of powerful vested interests. Of the total land area forests comprise about 17 per cent. Dense vegetation stands at approximately 9.77 per cent, of which 4.45 per cent, or half, are in the hands of land grabbers.

It is not only a question of forcible taking over of forests by greedy loggers. What has come to light is that the rate of decimation has increased dramatically over the last four years. Illegal logging, smuggling of timber, land grabbing in the name of setting up industries have all colluded to make matters worse. Government rules and regulations governing forest reserves are openly flouted, thanks partly due to lack of coordination between the Department of Environment and other relevant ministries and divisions.

Forestry serves as a watershed, since practically all water ultimately comes from rivers and lakes and from forest-derived water tables. Taking that out of the equation would have disastrous results. Forests serve as a habitat for animals and insects and are an essential part of the ecosystem. A healthy ecosystem acts as a buffer against a variety of disasters.

Local leaders make a difference

Worth emulating

WHEN politics at national level is marked with confrontation, local level leadership in Khulna seems to have struck a different chord. Mayoral candidates from all the warring parties sat on the same dais, held each other's hand and pledged to the audience that they would work for all-out development of the city.

This is something rare in contemporary Bangladesh politics and also immensely reassuring. Though city corporation elections are supposedly a non-party affair, the fact remains that the candidates represent some major players in national politics like the ruling Awami League, the opposition BNP and the alliances these parties lead.

The mayoral candidates from Awami League, BNP and Jatiya Party also devised a novel way through lottery to avoid the speakers' scramble for grabbing the mike.

As a result, all the candidates could smoothly and peacefully deliver their speeches to the audience assembled at the city's Hadis Park.

The Khulna event has a lesson for the leaders in national politics. The local leaders of Khulna have been able to scale the wall of difference raised between them by the two major political parties of the country. In fact, they have been able to set a trend for those in politics to emulate.

Will the leaders of ruling Awami League and BNP, forever at daggers drawn, come around to bury their differences for once to break the existing political stalemate and engage themselves constructively in the greater interest of the nation? Khulna is a glaring example before them.

Limit on Muslim births threatens Myanmar reforms

EDITORIAL DESK

MYANMAR is about to impose a two-child limit on Muslim Rohingya families in two townships of western Rakhine state. The policy is straightforward discrimination, as it will not be applied to the country's majority-Buddhist population.

The new policy to limit Muslim children is a perhaps the most obvious example of modern-day ethno-religious discrimination seen anywhere. It has already provoked strong criticism..

A full democracy -- as Myanmar is telling the world it is going to be -- is an open society that respects the basic rights and equality of all its citizens, whom it represents. Any move by the state to eliminate or limit the population of one segment of society is therefore grossly undemocratic and also muddle-headed. Such a policy will never solve ethno-religious conflict in Myanmar, but instead only serve to fuel further division and dispute in society.

There would be no such problem if Myanmar merely wanted to limit the growth of its whole population. Many countries control the birth rate, but such efforts are applied across the entire populace, not targeted at particular groups in particular places. Such policies follow the broad principle that controlling the birth rate should not be based on racism or racial discrimination.

Muslims might be the majority in the two townships, but this group of the population accounts for only 4 per cent of the total 60 million living in Myanmar. If the current government feels that a population of 60 million is too many and wants to reduce that number, it could impose its two-child policy on all families, irrespective of creed or credo.

However it should be borne in mind that, from a practical perspective, this kind of birth-rate control policy will never work. China's one-child policy is a good example. It created more problems than it solved, as Chinese families often favour sons over daughters.

The best way to solve the sectarian conflict in Myanmar is not by supporting crude social engineering but by campaigning to change the mindset of the country's elite so that they accept their Muslim compatriots as a crucial part of the nation-building process now under way. The government and state authorities need to offer equality of treatment and protection to all ethnic and religious groups.

As the man leading his country's reform process, President Thein Sein, enjoys telling the world, Myanmar is committed to being an open and democratic society. But equality is a fundamental principle of democracy. The president should not allow discrimination to jeopardise the journey to full democracy.

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Minimising autocracy: Some recommendations

G.M. QUADER

AFTER changeover in 1991 and the subsequent amendment to the constitution, a unique type of governance system has been introduced in Bangladesh. Since a parliament is formed by elected representatives the system is named parliamentary form of democracy. But, neither the role of parliament nor the culture of democracy is visible in the system.

After the election of Parliament, the position of chief executive of the country or Prime Minister (PM) is taken over by the majority party chief (if elected) who continues to hold the party position simultaneously. PM is having the absolute authority of executive power of the government. So much so, that government means for all practical purposes the PM only. PM also possesses similar control on Parliament. Parliament in reality has no role in governance and is considered rubber stamp organ for legalising the desires and actions of the PM. Due to the same reason Parliament has always been boycotted by the opposition parties whoever that had been. PM can also exert considerable influence on the office of the President and Judiciary.

PM alone under the existing system is in a position to exercise almost the entire authority and executive power of the state without any hindrance and bypassing all accountability. This is by definition a dictatorial rule and is sure to evolve into autocracy in the absence of any accountability. All social evils subsequently surface as a natural consequence.

It may be mentioned, Bangladesh ranked as the most corrupt country consecutively for five years with effect from 2001 to 2005 as per Transparency International (TI). It is still within the category of the most corrupt group of countries.

As has been mentioned already, all the power of the government administration is centralised in the PM. So, if and when PM desires to act on jobs assigned to others and not directly under PM, it is possible and is often being practiced. In that way PM gets involved directly in almost all the problems of the country including many routine works of general nature. As a result, every single person looks forward to the head of the government for directives even on very tri-

fling matters and nothing moves without PM's intervention. Considering the volume of work it is not humanly possible for a person to do the same properly. Mismanagement, lack of coordination, inefficiency, irregularities, spread of corruption and violence etc. in short absence of good governance and rule of law are the natural outcome.

Since head of government is being involved in almost all works, big and small, he/she is perceived to be personally responsible for any mishaps (sometimes even without being so) when that happens, be it a case of big corruption, irregularity, accident of any sort and subsequent loss of life etc.

With the possibility of being made responsible for misdeeds occurring during the tenure it is



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considered too unsafe to accept the idea of being outside of power. So, the struggle for perpetuating in power by any means or to grab the same again by hook or by crook has been continuing. Partisan interests are being promoted; corruption and violence by party people are protected for creation of powerful vested interest etc are thought to be utilised for that purpose.

Some recommendations are put below with an objective of curtailing the autocratic power of the head of the government and also to ensure effectiveness of some institutions vital for practice of democratic culture:

It should be made mandatory for the party chief to relinquish that position if he/she accepts the position of head of government after winning election. Party chief and head of the government should be two different persons.

Nobody should be allowed to hold the post of PM for more than two terms.

Article 70 of the constitution as regards floor crossing by the MPs should be made softer and example of Indian constitution may be followed in that respect.

Election to and removal from the position of Speaker should be made on receipt of three fourth or two third majority votes of MPs.

There could be consensus among all the political parties to allow the Speaker to continue for the next tenure without any contest.

All necessary steps should be taken to effectively separate Judiciary from the executive.

Election commission should be made independent with enough power and authority to enable it to enforce the election related laws and rules effectively.

The present system of constituency based election could be amended, to be on proportional representation basis, where candidates will be declared elected from amongst a pre-declared list serially, the total number being proportionate to the total votes received by the party against the total votes cast.

Election for the post of President may be done with secret balloting.

People's expectation after 1991 had been that there would be practice of democratic culture and peaceful transfer of power. But, it did not happen in reality. Country is not run with democratic values rather it is being governed by a single person. Transfer of power after expiry of a term is becoming more and more complex with ever rising conflicts. Nobody is sure where will all these end. Recommendations as suggested may be considered for minimising autocracy and the associated evils.

The writer is Hon'ble Minister, Ministry of Commerce, Bangladesh.

China-South Asia Exposition will create new opportunities

QU GUANGZHOU

THE 1st China-South Asia Exposition will be held from June 6 to 10, 2013 in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province of China. Bangladesh will be the theme country of the Expo and the rotating president of China-South Asia Business Forum.

The China-South Asia Exposition is the first national level exposition aiming to promote cooperation with South Asian countries. By honoring Bangladesh as the theme country of the Expo, the Chinese side demonstrates its will to strengthen its economic and trade cooperation with Bangladesh. The Expo will serve as a platform to showcase Bangladeshi cultural diversity and development achievements, boost Bangladesh's export to China and attract more Chinese investment, facilitate the mutual understanding and friendly exchanges between China and Bangladesh, and provide a golden opportunity for the two countries to deepen bilateral economic and trade cooperation.

The economic and trade cooperation between China and Bangladesh have maintained good momentum in recent years, and the proportion of our bilateral trade volume is increasing in the total trade volume between China and South Asian countries.

Bangladesh now has become China's third biggest trade partner in South Asia, while China is the largest origin of Bangladesh's imports. According to China's statistics, the trade volume reached 8.45 billion USD in 2012, 7 times more than that of 2002. The growth rate of bilateral trade has achieved 36.6% in the first quarter of this year, with that of Bangladesh's export to China standing at 37.5%, which is quite encouraging. More and more Chinese businessmen are willing to invest in Bangladesh and the growth rate of direct investment is accelerating. At the same time, there are still some challenges to overcome, i.e. reducing trade imbalance, enriching cooperation modalities, diversifying trade categories, and expanding trade platforms.

China is the largest neighboring country of South Asia and has become the second largest economy in the world. At present, China is making every effort to adjust its economic structure, change the modality of development, and implement the strategy of developing the western regions and expand its opening-up. With rich human resources, high level economic openness and preferential fiscal & monetary policies, Bangladesh has achieved strong economic growth in recent years. China and Bangladesh are highly complementary in economy, and there is great potential for the two regional countries to deepen economic and trade cooperation.

The report of 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) noted that "China will continue to promote friendship and partnership with our neighbors, consolidate friendly relations and deepen mutually beneficial cooperation with them, and ensure that China's

development will bring more benefits to our neighbors." Inviting Bangladesh to participate the first China-South Asia Expo, China hopes to make full use of the respective advantages of the two countries, expand and deepen economic and trade cooperation, realize industrial docking and share development dividends, so as to achieve development and prosperity together. China always attaches importance to addressing problems in bilateral economic and trade cooperation and has taken positive steps. Since 2010, China has gradually given Bangladesh-made goods duty-free status. Currently, more than 4,700 items of Bangladesh-made goods enjoy duty-free facility when exported to China, and China is expected to further expand the facility in 2013 and gradually achieve the goal to cover 97% of the Bangladesh-made goods. We believe this initiative will provide strong support for Bangladesh friends to export Bangladesh-made goods to China.

Currently, Yunnan Province is now experiencing dynamic economic growth in China, enjoying over 10% of GDP growth over the years. In the year 2012, the GDP of Yunnan Province is more than 1 trillion Yuan (160 billion USD). Thanks to geological proximity, Yunnan and Bangladesh have maintained close economic, trade and cultural exchanges since ancient times. The two places were tightly linked by the Ancient Silk Road, while Yunnan has been the bridgehead and leader in the bilateral economic and trade cooperation. By further developing this cooperation, Bangladesh will be connected to the south-western part of China and the whole mainland at large. The China-South Asia Expo is providing a valuable opportunity for Bangladesh to strengthen its trade and economic cooperation with Yunnan Province and surf the wave of China's economic boom.

During Premier H.E. Mr. Li Keqiang's visit to India recently, both countries proposed to establish a China-India-Myanmar-Bangladesh economic corridor in their Joint Statement. If the proposal is materialised, this economic circle with a population of 2.8 billion will create an unprecedented opportunity for the countries involved. Just as H.E. Mr. Li Keqiang said, only entrepreneurs with vision and perspective can seize this opportunity. Now, the China-South Asia Expo is serving this best opportunity to you.

I believe the Bangladeshi friends can firmly grasp the development trend of the world economy, and fully utilise China-South Asia Expo as an economic and trade cooperation platform. Through jointly pursuing innovation, cooperation and development, I am sure that you will make new and greater contribution to promotion of China-Bangladesh economic and trade cooperation, and stabilisation and prosperity of South Asia.

The writer is Political Counsellor and DCM of the Chinese Embassy, Dhaka.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Get rid of political impasse



BANGLA CHOKH

It appears that the whole nation is on the brink of catastrophe stemming from disagreement between the ruling and opposition parties over the question of polls-time government. The overwhelming majority believe that the polls will not be fair under partisan government. If it is not possible to restore the caretaker government system, a neutral government can be formed by elected members of all the parties. It's not a big deal. I am confident Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, owes this to the nation. She may invite Khaleda Zia for one-to-one talk over a private informal dinner and defuse the tense situation within minutes. I am sure this gesture will not only pacify the whole nation but also earn her dividend in the next election.

S.A. Samad

A retired banker

The new get-up

Iftekhkar's letter, published on May 25th, does not seem to be totally factual. I'm a retired person and a regular reader of top five English dailies of Dhaka plus a Friday weekly paper; all are priced at ten taka each. So the statement that all newspapers are sold at seven to eight taka doesn't appear to be factual. Regarding the content of the editorial page, the quality has not deteriorated. The wide reader interaction in your newspaper compared to the other English dailies represents the best part of your daily. From a reader's point of view, I would not be so critical as to call it a downgrade.

Engr. S. A. Mansoor

Dhaka

Accountability for all killings

Syed Badrul Ahsan in a recent article (TDS May 23, 2013) highlighted the 'execution/murder' of Col Taher and others. Over time in various articles, he has demanded accountability for the killings, murders, extra-judicial deaths, etc., during the Liberation War. He has adequately covered the periods from 25th March to 15th Dec 1971 (ICT on-going with specific cases), 15th Aug to 7th Nov 1975, the dictatorial periods up to 31st May 1981 and end of 1990.

Now if only he could deal with the periods prior to 25th March 1971 and from 10 Jan 1972 to 14 Aug 1975, the killing gaps would be filled.

Once those responsible are tried by the ICT, we can turn to the periods from 1991 to-date (when our so-called democracy 'flowered' like the Rafflesia Arnoldii).

Sikander Ahmed

Gulshan-1, Dhaka

Comments on news report, "US roots against hartal," published on May 28, 2013

Nds

Violence is something that makes the US champion in the modern-day world. So, I think US under secretary's dismay at violence in Bangladesh politics is nothing but crocodile tears. Rather Khaleda Zia must keep in mind that US's dissatisfaction may have little effect on her party but mounting public discontent against her might have irreparable effect on her leadership in Bangladesh.

Kirtonkhola

So, do you think we can establish peace for the people through creating violence, intimidating people and vandalising public and private properties? Hartal is a way of throwing political parties' tantrum and making ordinary people a hostage.

Peaceful citizen

Hope BNP will go back to the drawing board and redraw their strategy for a better outcome of their political demands.

Samih34

Could you sense that PM, in order to cling to power, threw out the CTG system from the constitution in such haste totally disregarding the parliamentary standing committee's recommendation to keep the system on for another two terms in line with HC order?

Iqbal Khan

Election year politics should be changed to create a peaceful democratic atmosphere. Political parties must find an alternative to hartal.

Mutasim Rahman

I sometimes feel embarrassed when my foreign colleagues say that our country will be the champion of strikes. Of course, our two leaders don't feel any embarrassment.

Ash C.

The cancellation of Khaleda-Sherman meeting in no way will affect millions of voters' choice in the next national election, though some pundits are overjoyed at such a turn of event! This is just part of international diplomacy.