

Building code remains unenforced

Rajuk the absentee regulator

IT is true that Rajdhani Unnayan Katiripakkhya (Rajuk) suffers from many a constraint. The body is responsible for controlling an area spanning 1,528km² of Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan. Is it any wonder that Rajuk is failing to live up to the mammoth task of enforcing the national building code (BNBC) with a handful of inspectors? Despite the single largest loss of life in the collapse on an industrial plot in Savar, the dilly-dallying and bureaucratic red-tape in beefing up Rajuk personnel is sickening, to say the least.

Although there has been talk of increasing Rajuk's manpower for some time now, apparently it has taken two and a half years to get approvals from housing and public works ministry and the cabinet. This is hardly acceptable, since safety precautions and mandatory building codes are openly flouted in the construction of thousands of buildings in Savar and peripheral areas of Dhaka. Then of course there is the conflict in clear demarcation of whose responsibility ends where with many municipal authorities strongly contesting Rajuk's jurisdiction.

As per the Building Construction Act and BNBC, only an authorised officer along with a building construction committee of Rajuk can approve a building design within an area of the national plan. As things stand now in terms of both manpower and authority to enforce jurisdiction, there is little scope of doing anything besides indulging in blame game when a Rana-type Plaza incident occurs. Is it not time authorities woke up to realities on the ground? Or will the 1,100 plus people who died at Rana Plaza be mere statistics?

Outrage against a Hindu temple

Govt should act decisively

ELEMENTS out to destroy communal harmony have again attacked a 150-year-old Hindu temple at Hossainpur upazila in Kishoreganj damaging idols of deities in it. This is the latest act of vandalism in series of assaults on places of worship of the Hindus and other minority communities since February this year.

Distressingly, miscreants behind the outrage are yet to be identified, far less nabbed and brought to justice.

The incident falls into a pattern. The evil quarters behind such despoiling of Hindu temples are trying to terrorise and create a sense of insecurity among Hindus and other minority religious groups.

After each such act of outrage, committees were formed by the administration to home in on and arrest the miscreants. But precious little could be done so far to stop these acts of barbarity against minority communities from happening. It is a very sad commentary on an administration that prides itself in being avowedly secular.

Notably, it is not just a matter of constitutional duty for the government to protect all its citizens including the minority groups. In fact, to be called a civilised society, we can ill-afford to abdicate this sacred responsibility.

The government cannot any more just watch, while the scandalous attacks against religious minorities continue. For effectively addressing the issue, the government needs to expeditiously implement last month's High Court Order to form a high-powered body to conduct investigations into these incidents and prepare a comprehensive

Hidebound by history

CROSS TALK


 MOHAMMAD
 BADRUL AHSAN

It's nothing new that history is shifted like goalposts while truth is dragged from port to port. There are many examples of how history is a mere tool by which the victors write their future agenda.

The Stalinists removed Leon Trotsky from historic photos of the Russian Revolution. The Chinese leader Mao Ze Dung purged his party colleagues one by one, his revolution looking shriveled like an aging face losing its teeth one after another. French revolutionary Maximilien de Robespierre imprecated the Reign of Terror because he believed it was necessary to discover and reveal the enemy within Paris, within France, the enemy that hid in the safety of apparent patriotism. He had his former revolutionary colleagues Danton, Desmoulins and many others arrested and guillotined before he also met their fate in less than four months.

Thirty-seven years ago, Ziaur Rahman had history on his side. He ordered the trial and execution of Taher and had him removed from the picture. The table has turned on Zia today and his enemies are now trying to toss him out of there. There are those amongst the political and military leaders of this country who believe Zia had to crush Taher and his Gono Bahini to restore discipline in the army. The Taher sympathisers take an opposite view. They contend that Zia betrayed the same man who had rescued him from house arrest on November 7, 1975. They also insist that Zia had Taher hanged after a sham trial to claw his way to power.

In Georg Buchner's *Danton's Death*, a controversial play about the French Revolution, Danton said, "Revolution is like Saturn, it devours its own children." In our case, whether we blame one side or another, we have got two decorated freedom fighters pitted against each other. They fought together, fought for each other, and then they also

ON May 20, the High Court disclosed its full version of the verdict on the 1976 trial of Colonel Taher, which was already announced on March 22, 2011. The court ruled that the execution of the late colonel was "illegal and unconstitutional" and that it was masterminded by none other than the late president Ziaur Rahman. The court ruling further said that, henceforth, Taher would be treated as a martyr and a patriot instead of a traitor.



STAR ARCHIVE

Has our history reached that equilibrium point when we can start thinking of a national reconciliation and move on?

fought with each other. In the end, they both got consumed by the same power struggle that is still killing people in this country. Zia was gunned down roughly five years after Taher's hanging on July 21, 1976. Thirty-two years ago, renegade soldiers took his life at Chittagong Circuit House on the fateful night of May 30, 1981.

The country is divided on the issue of who is less heroic of these two heroes. If one court (a military tribunal) found Taher guilty of treason, another found enough reasons to convict Zia. It's said that in the corporate world, today's hero is tomorrow's zero. Heroes are those who get to bask in history's sunshine. Zeroes are when history dims out on them, leaving them in its damp and dark corners.

In a country where history is handled with the ease of changing pictures in a frame, we have to wait and see which picture will outlast the other. Another 37 years later, we might see yet another flip-flop, another tossing tournament that will give us a different picture. Are we never going to learn that hollowed history can't be hallowed?

There are only two options in politics. One resembles chess game, another card game. Chess is an endgame, which can last until the opponent is eliminated to the last piece. Card game is different because one can reshuffle the cards and start all over again.

Unless we collectively learn to forgive and forget, we shall never be able to logically end our pursuit of vengeance to its logical end. Zia had his moment in history. Taher has got his now. Has our history reached that equilibrium point when we can start thinking of a national reconciliation and move on?

The crocodiles have a chemical in their blood that heals the horrendous wounds they inflict on each other. Some nations have that capacity in their political system. They fight, forgive and forget in their abiding tradition of putting their country before everything else.

For us, the wound always festers. The power struggle that tore apart Zia and Taher decades ago, still continues to divide us. Proud nations make history, but why isn't that the case for this country? The answer is that we have been living in history more than history is living in us. Hidebound by history, we go on fighting over mistakes without learning anything from the past.

The writer is the Editor of weekly *First News* and an opinion writer for *The Daily Star*. Email: badrul151@yahoo.com

The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

In Syria, go big or stay home



AFP

RAY TAKEHY

FROM liberal internationalists to hawkish conservatives, a chorus of influential voices in Washington is suggesting that American intervention in Syria would also do serious damage to Bashar Assad's close ally, Iran.

Military action in Syria would demonstrate, so the argument goes, that America is serious about enforcing its red lines. Impressed and crestfallen, Iran's recalcitrant mullahs would scale back their nuclear zeal and conform to international nonproliferation agreements.

However, given the fact that any intervention by the Obama administration is likely to be tentative and halting, rather than an overwhelming show of military force, it is not likely to end Syria's civil war or intimidate Iran's rulers.

The sort of intervention needed to bring about a decisive rebel victory would require more than no-fly zones and arms. It would mean disabling Assad's air power and putting boots on the ground. America would have to take the lead in organizing a regional military force blessed by the Arab League and supported by its own intelligence assets and Special Forces. After that would come the task of reconstituting Syria and mediating its sectarian conflicts. As the war in Iraq painfully demonstrated, refashioning national institutions from the debris of a civil war can be more taxing than the original military intervention.

Because it would take all of this to oust Assad and end the violence, America must accept the need for a robust intervention. There is no easy solution or middle ground. Moreover, rather than intimidating Iran, a less-than-decisive American intervention in Syria would do the opposite. It would convince Iran's leaders that America doesn't have an appetite for fighting a major war in the region.

There is something curious about the debate gripping Washington. Although the Assad regime has massacred more than 70,000 of its citizens and appears to have violated all norms of warfare by using chemical weapons against civilians, calls for robust intervention are muted.

The legacy of Iraq looms large. A war-weary nation that has sacrificed so much on the battlefields of the Middle East is reluctant to embark on new campaigns. Neither the Obama administration nor its Congressional critics seem to have an appetite for nation-building. And there is a reluctance to admit that half measures like arming the rebels or establishing a no-fly zone are unlikely to end the suffering of the Syrian people in the face of a determined Alawite minority, led by a vicious Assad, who has no

qualms about carrying out ethnic cleansing in a struggle to the death.

A prolonged war in Syria would offer Iran the same advantages that America's invasion of Iraq did. Once the United States settled into the task of reconstituting Iraq, generals, politicians and pundits insisted that a second front couldn't be opened in the Middle East. As Washington tried to sort out Iraq's troubles, it ignored Iran's mischief and subversion.

While Iran enjoyed immunity from American military force as a result of Washington's preoccupation with Iraq's civil war, Iranian proxies in Iraq systematically assaulted American troops with I.E.D.'s and helped derail their mission. In the meantime, Iran's mothballed nuclear infrastructure was taken out of storage and refurbished.

If a very reluctant Obama administration does become entangled in Syria, it is likely to treat Iran with the same degree of caution as the more hawkish Bush administration did - avoiding any direct confrontation with Iran and refraining from issuing ultimatums about Iran's nuclear program. The result would be an emboldened Iran willing to cross the nuclear threshold and assert its dominance throughout the region.

To be clear, there is no doubt that a decisive rebel victory in Syria and the fall of the Assad dynasty would constitute a major setback for Iran, given that Syria has always been Iran's most reliable pathway to its proxy Hezbollah. But a rebel rout is highly unlikely without full-scale, decisive American intervention.

Facing public pressure to stop the violence, Washington may soon embark on an incremental intervention that would gradually deepen American involvement without producing a decisive outcome. But such half measures won't impress Iran's hardened rulers, who are engaged in a fundamental struggle for the future of the Middle East.

Pleased with Obama's much vaunted pivot to Asia, the mullahs in Tehran are already convinced that America seeks deliverance from its Arab inheritance. A major American intervention would give them pause; a reluctant intercession in Syria by a hesitant America would only enhance their resolve.

Paradoxically, an intervention intended to persuade Iran's leaders of the viability of American red lines could instead convince them that their nuclear program is safe from American retaliation.

The writer is a senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

© New York Times. Distributed by the New York Times Syndicate.

LETTERS

 TO THE EDITOR
 letters@thedailystar.net

Week's Best

Controlling cyberspace

Though it wants to use the Internet to create a "Digital Bangladesh", the AL government seems to fear the power of cyberspace and has been adopting too many policies to curb it. First there was the monitoring of social media including Facebook, and now the government plans to move to the next level and filter out "sensitive" content coming into the country across many websites and gateways.

Being exposed to a wide variety of information sources is the best way for people to sort through and decide on their own what is sensitive and what is not. This filter sounds like a national-level version of the parental controls that one can set up on a television to control content. The difference is that the people of Bangladesh are not children and should not be treated as such.

 Neil Taylor
 On e-mail

Gandhi's blood unsold!

The sample of blood on a microscope slide which Gandhi gave to a friend after an appendix operation in the 1920s, failed to sell at auction recently. It may be mentioned that the blood sample was one of 50 items of Mahatma Gandhi memorabilia, including a rare British parliament paper declaring Gandhi a terrorist, which were up for sales. Gandhi's unsold blood sample in the auction leads us to think that people are not interested in collecting this stuff in memory of Gandhi. Generally, blood does not come out of the body without any injury. Blood should symbolise peace in no way.

 Mobarak Ali
 Gopibagh, Dhaka

Non-food biofuel source

Production of biofuel may hamper cultivation of food crops thereby jeopardising the world food system and security. Care has to be taken to produce biofuel from non-food materials like perennial grasses and waste materials from agriculture and forestry. Smart policies are needed to continue the commercialisation of advanced cellulosic biofuels that reduce petroleum oil use while protecting our food system and environment. Biotechnological research has to be intensified on a global basis to innovate appropriate and sustainable technology for profitable production of biofuel.

 Professor M Zahidul Haque
 Dean, Faculty of Agriculture
 SAU, Dhaka

Small font size

I fully support the views expressed by Dr. B. Sultan and Nahid Iftekhar in their letters dated 19th and 25th May respectively. I would also like to say that the font size of the letters has also gone small, which hurts the eyes. I am sure the elderly people like me read the newspaper most. I hope you will consider our problem.

 Nurul Sabah
 Bashundhara R/A
 Dhaka

Comments on news report, "Price double the budget," published on May 29, 2013

Iftekhar Hassan

Obviously it is the government officials who are helping these illegal forest product extractors and smugglers. Without the help from the officials of the forest department and land registry department such illegal acts can not take place. Since government officials are involved in corruption, it does not have the power to enforce the forest law.

A reader

Environment is not a matter of game and the government officials should understand that.

Mark Akamat

Overhaul the whole forestry department and take wildlife out of it making it a separate department with footings equal to present forest and environment departments. Wildlife and forest conservation departments will not be money generating departments. Rather these two will save the biodiversity of the country.

* * * *

"Rajuk role in question" May 29, 2013

Mofi

I wonder if there would be any real benefit of increasing manpower of an organisation, which is well known for irregularities and corruption!

Abir Hasan

RAJUK is one of the most corrupt government offices in Bangladesh. ACC should 'purify' the office for the safety of this country.

Shafiqur Rahman

Agreed. I would like to see the houses of the RAJUK officials- they must be very luxurious. Question is-where did they get the money to build their properties? Their 'actual' salaries are not their 'real' salaries. Now their excuse is that they don't have enough manpower. We don't just need enough manpower, we need 'qualified' manpower- without corruption of course.

WORLD NO TOBACCO DAY



BAN TOBACCO ADVERTISING, PROMOTION AND SPONSORSHIP

Death in tobacco: Choice is yours

SHEGUFTA YASMIN

TODAY, 31 May is observed as World No Tobacco Day. This day highlights the health risks associated with tobacco use and advocating for effective policies to reduce tobacco consumption.

Every person should have smoke-free air to breathe. According to Who, tobacco kills nearly six million people each year, of which more than 6,00,000 are non-smokers dying from breathing second-hand smoke. This tobacco will kill more than eight million people every year by 2030. More than 80 per cent of these deaths will be among people living in low-and middle-income countries.

Consumption of tobacco products is increasing globally, but it is decreasing in some high-income and upper middle-income countries. In Bangladesh it is increasing very rapidly.

Second-hand smoke fills restaurants, offices or other closed spaces when people burn tobacco products such as cigarettes, bidis and water pipes. There are more than 4000 chemicals in tobacco smoke, of which at least 250 are known to be harmful and more than 50 are known to cause cancer.

Tobacco taxes are the most effective way to reduce tobacco use, especially among young people and poor people. Cost of cigarettes should be increased in such height which will be very costly for youngsters. "The great gift of family life is to be intimately acquainted with people you might never even introduce yourself to, had life not done it for you." A family can help a smoker to refrain from it.

"To cease smoking is the easiest thing I ever did. I ought to know because I've done it a thousand times." Mark Twain said with humour. Repeatedly start smoking and stop it - is not the solution. One has to leave it because every person loves himself most; how can he love his death, named-tobacco?

Everyone knows the adverse reaction of smoking; nothing new in it. To ban advertising, promotion and sponsorship of tobacco is most welcome if our policy makers and government wishes; but it is not enough to stop tobacco intake. Along with ban, we need mass awareness in public and family levels.

Then choice is yours - whether you will embrace your death or live your life in healthy way

The writer is senior Lecturer, Dept. of English, ASA University Bangladesh.