

Tannery relocation riddle

Public health safety unaddressed

RELOCATION of some 155 tanneries from Hazaribagh area of Dhaka city has been on the cards since its approval by ECNEC in 2003. A revised relocation development project was however approved in 2007. Thus in effect, six years down the line, we are still talking about relocation. The continued bickering over cost sharing of central effluent treatment plant (CETP) between government and Bangladesh Tannery Association is dumbfounding, especially since the land and utility services have been provided by the State. Meanwhile the foot dragging tactic by the industry has helped shoot up relocation costs by nearly double the original amount.

The question today is why are we even having discussion on the subject of moving this hazardous industry out of the heart of Dhaka? Several studies including one published in 'International Journal of Environmental Science and Development' in April, 2012 pointed out: "Hazaribagh consists of more than 200 tanneries generating an approximately 7.7 million litre of liquid waste and 88 million tons of solid waste every day. The direct discharge of these wastes has contaminated the ground and surface water with dangerously high concentrations of chromium, cadmium, arsenic and lead. The contamination of rivers also allows these pollutants to accumulate in common fish and shell-fish species, which are used as local food sources."

Despite being armed with studies and the recent threat by European Union to stop purchasing Bangladeshi leather goods unless CETP is made functional, it has without doubt become unconscionable that the government isn't fast tracking relocation in the interest of protecting public health and a billion-dollar export industry per annum.

The damaged railway clips

A threat to passenger safety

BROKEN and rusted metal clips of rail tracks of the Bangabandhu Bridge on the river Jamuna are not only costing the national exchequer dear, but also posing a serious threat to train travellers using this bridge.

Supposed to last three to four decades, these expensive elastic metal clips have been damaged within only one decade and a half of their installation.

Unquestionably these clamps are of poor quality. But railway officials have not said anything about their quality, but only blamed toilet wastes falling on the rail line from passing trains as the cause of their wear and tear.

However, an expert at the Buet maintains that since those are high grade purpose-specific clips, they should not have proved so fragile.

The question that naturally arises is how these standard clips could get installed and who are responsible for that? There may have been some dubious dealing involved and the government must find out the truth.

The BR must replace the damaged clips, if only for secure and safe passage of thousands of travellers crossing the bridge everyday.

Steps for replacement have been taken only for about 20 per cent of a total of 59,000 metal clips found visibly damaged.

Now the BR should conduct a thorough investigation into the condition of the entire rail track and suggest measures for their early repair and maintenance.

US and Snowden: Rules for cyberspace

EDITORIAL DESK, CHINA DAILY

WITH people looking for effective supervision of, and serious reflection on, the United States' controversial surveillance programmes, the reforms pledged by US President Barack Obama have not met expectations.

In what looks like a remedial approach to ease the concerns of US citizens about infringements on civil rights, Obama announced a number of measures on Friday to strengthen the oversight and transparency of the surveillance programme.

His proposals include restructuring the secret court that oversees surveillance programmes in the US and reforming the Patriot Act, which provides the legal basis for data collection, as well as the setting up of a "high-level group of outside experts" to review surveillance technologies.

"It's not enough for me, as president, to have confidence in these programmes; the American people need to have confidence in them as well," Obama said.

But given former US National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden's revelations about the extent of secret spying on private Internet and telephone usage, Obama's proposals will not have inspired confidence that the snooping is being reined in, as it is obvious that none of the measures will fundamentally change the US surveillance regime.

Which is also worrying to the citizens of other countries, as they, too, are victims of US surveillance programmes, such as PRISM.

More than two months after Snowden began his whistle-blowing, the US is yet to come up with something better than the smoke and mirrors of public relations spin doctoring aimed at taking the sting out of domestic sentiment.

The US should show sincerity, as well as a sense of responsibility, and properly address the global concerns about its information collection system.

The Snowden case should sound the alarm that cyberspace cannot be "uncharted waters" any longer. It is also a timely reminder to all that cybersecurity is a pressing issue for almost every nation and needs collective efforts. The time has come for all members of the international community to work together to establish just and fair global rules and join hands to maintain order and security in cyberspace.

The US enjoys supremacy in Internet technologies. It should act in a responsible way and actively engage in international cooperation with other countries so that international regulations on surveillance activities can be enacted in an early date.

The legacy of Partition

GROUND REALITIES



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

yet the Cabinet Mission in 1946 raised the hope that somehow the territorial integrity of the country could be retained through a major restructuring of politics before independence could come to India.

Mohammad Ali Jinnah reluctantly accepted the Cabinet Mission scheme. So did the leading lights of the Indian National Congress, until Jawaharlal Nehru put a damper on the entire plan. He made it clear that his party was not obligated to see the plan reach a definitive conclusion. That was on July 10, 1946. The Muslim League, already uncomfortable at having accepted the Cabinet Mission Plan, saw Nehru's remarks as a godsend and swiftly backed out of it. A month later, thanks to the Muslim League's Direct Action Day, Muslims and Hindus cheerfully hacked away at one another in Calcutta. That was on 16 August. Four days later, anywhere between five thousand and ten thousand people, Hindus and Muslims, lay dead all across the streets of the huge metropolis. Partition had become inevitable.

Within days of the state of Pakistan coming into being on August 14, 1947, Jinnah went on an aerial survey of the situation on the ground. The sight of hundreds of thousands of refugees making their way away from their ancestral homes and toward villages and towns they had never seen or been to earlier sent a wave of shock through his being. "What have I done?"—that was the question he raised. No one answered. Within months, millions of Hindus and Sikhs would leave their ancient homes in Punjab and Bengal and trek to an uncertain future across unknown geography. Millions of Muslims would make their way to Pakistan, convinced that it was there they would live in dignity as masters of their destiny.

Sixty six years after Partition, one would do well to take stock of the ramifications of the vivisection of the land. Hindus and Muslims have only seen their relations worsen through the decades, to a point where communalism continues to define life all the way from Pakistan through India to Bangladesh. Hindutva undermines the secular vision that was once Nehru's legacy. In Pakistan and to a certain extent in Bangladesh, religious bigotry threatens to wreck liberalism of all sorts. India's Muslims remain largely backward, poor and, in a very big way, less than well-educated. In Pakistan, Hindus are as good as non-existent; and the tiny Christian minority is always the target of blasphemy law peddlers in the country. Bangladesh's

CRACKS began to develop in India's unity as a country when the poet Mohammad Iqbal began propounding the idea of Muslims being an entity separate from all other communities in the land. The All-India Muslim League developed the theme a little further and made it clear that the Muslims inhabiting the north-west and east of India would need to constitute themselves into independent states. The die, if one were inclined to observe circumstances in such critical manner, was cast. And

Hindu population has been on a steep decline, despite the country's self-proclaimed secularism; its Christian community becomes smaller by the day; and after Ramu, its Buddhists are not sure this is their country any more.

Post-partition India has thrown up the likes of Bal Thackeray, who thought all Muslims should be kicked out of the country. Today, it is the controversial, none too Muslim-friendly Narendra Modi who dreams of being prime minister someday. In Pakistan and Bangladesh, no one imagines that a Hindu or Christian or Buddhist can play leading roles in politics and in the administration. If India's BJP touts Hindu nationalism, Pakistan's political parties continue to see nothing beyond Islam, while Bangladesh's rightwing discover, through 'Bangladeshi nationalism', a clever way of repudiating Bengali nationhood in favour of a shrewd pursuit of religion-based politics. Secular politics never took roots in Pakistan. In India and Bangladesh, it has been forced to the ropes.

The division of India has led to a diminution of politics through the rise of dynasties across the old country. The Bhuttos in Pakistan, the Nehru-Gandhis in India and the Mujib and Zia clans in Bangladesh have created the perfect conditions for mediocrity to thrive in politics. Behind these larger dynasties come the little ones—in politics, in the movies, indeed nearly everywhere. The modern-day republic is thus but another name for monarchies in new wrapping.

Partition saw the best among the Hindu community—teachers, philanthropists, doctors—leave Muslim Pakistan and make new homes across the newly drawn frontiers. It saw Muslim gentry, as in West Bengal, make the arduous decision to move to the new state of Pakistan in hopes of a better future. Both groups, as also their descendants, have remained trapped in nostalgia. Artists and writers have seen their futures devastated by Partition. The singer Noor Jehan went off to Pakistan, together with Saadat Hasan Manto. Khushwant Singh, Kuldip Nayar and Inder Kumar Gujral, their homeland suddenly foreign territory for them, resettled in an India vastly different from the one they had known earlier. Sahibzada Yaqub Khan trooped off to Pakistan even as his parents and siblings decided to stay on in India. Jinnah, Liaquat Ali Khan, H.S. Suhrawardy and Bhutto abandoned homes in India and made new homes in Pakistan.

Partition has seen democracy, minus the aberration of the 1975-77 Emergency, thrive in India. In Pakistan, the army has undermined prospects of democracy four times and continues to wield unbridled influence over the making of policy. In Bangladesh, the liberation of which was a revolt against Pakistan, military coups have led to the systematic murder of politicians and leading freedom fighters.

Partition gave us Louis Mountbatten and Cyril Radcliffe, who gave us divided homes and villages and provinces. It gave us three wars. It gave the people of the subcontinent defence budgets that have left them impoverished.

Sixty six years after 1947, the legacy of Partition remains questionable, for children in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh grow into adulthood without knowledge of one another, with mistrust and suspicion blocking the road to a full, satisfying comprehension of our post-modern world.

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Are HR organisations above accountability?

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN

TRUTHFULNESS and accuracy are the means by which Human Rights (HR) organisations prove they are objective and impartial. Being truthful and accurate means never deliberately distorting or exaggerating information. A tradition of accurate factual reporting is deeply established among human rights NGOs and is one of the means they establish public trust and confidence. The above basic tenets are the guiding principles of all credible HR organisations.

Recently, 'Odhikar' has come under the limelight, both nationally and internationally, after it published a report giving a very specific number of casualties in the flushing out operation of the Hefajat-e-Islam supporters from Shapla Chattar on the night of May 5 by the combined forces of the law enforcing authorities. In fact, the opposition politicians, including a former President joined his former comrades who ousted him from Bangabhaban, in a 'gaiabana janaza' the following morning to pray for the alleged 'thousands killed' in the 'genocide'. However, the finite number vis-à-vis the infinite number propagated by its detractors should have been respite for the authority, but the damage had already been done. The propaganda that 'thousands innocent Muslims were slaughtered' have contributed greatly to the loss of recently held five municipal elections for the government backed candidates in the country.

Since the casualty figures given by the government were much lower than the one published by Odikhar, as noted and opined in the DS editorial: "On July 10 the ministry of information, in a letter to Odikhar, wanted a list of the 61 deceased, along with their addresses and names of their parents. On July 17, Odikhar replied that it will submit such a list only if an independent commission is set up to investigate the incident, as there is no "victim or witness protection law in Bangladesh."

However, we fail to understand whose "protection" would have been jeopardised if names of the deceased were given, not names of those who were the "sources" of information.

As a newspaper we ourselves have reported extensively on the matter and have found no evidence of 61 people dying during the event."

As a newspaper, The Daily Star is undoubtedly second to none in the country in upholding the tenet of objective reporting and in this instance, its reporter was with the enforcing authorities during the whole operation and its number concurred more with the government's one than that of the one given by 'Odhikar.'

As a human right activist myself, I am very much aware of the factual evidence I have to submit when I communicate and send our report to international HR bodies, such as Amnesty International or UNHRC, in particular to solicit their supports in favour of the human right violations we deal with. A few weeks ago, when I wrote a piece for The Toronto Star, the largest newspaper of Canada, concerning

the war crimes trials, the editor verified each and every information I provided in the piece multiple times with me before giving his nod to publish it.

While 'Odhikar' has every right to demand a judicial enquiry into the incident, it has no right to use that as a precondition to comply with the request from the accused, which in this case is the government. Moreover, people of the country possess hardly any trust on such commissions and its report, as was evidenced, for instance, from the reports of the judicial enquiry commissions formed in the aftermath of August 21 mayhem or Mymensingh cinema hall blast.

When the accuracy of reports is challenged, the first question that organisations need to ask is whether the challenge should be taken seriously. It is a common practice, anywhere in the world, for those who are allegedly responsible for human rights violations to rebut accusations by claiming that the NGO producing the information is biased, acting in bad faith, motivated by undisclosed interests or simply lying. Truthfulness and accuracy are particularly important for NGOs that report on violations and they must distinguish their work from propaganda and establish a reputation of objectivity.

So, it is imperative that the NGO must keep itself ready with factual evidences to substantiate its accusations. The risk is that NGOs become blasé when accuracy is challenged and do not react when faced with a serious claim and that is exactly what happened with 'Odhikar'. Moreover, in the case in question, the challenge has been even more as the NGO as a whole and the accused person in particular has a serious political baggage to carry. A JSD candidate in 1991 election, he obviously changed his political ship to become one of the highest ranking law officers of the country during the last BNP-Jamaat government. In the highly politicised and polarised Bangladesh, only a politically naïve would believe that such a position under any government would be awarded to someone without political loyalty to the party in power.

While the modalities of his arrest could be debateable, his placement on remand was absolutely unacceptable. 'Remand in custody' is a common judicial decision in every country. It simply means questioning the accused while in custody before sending to jail. However, in Bangladesh, torture in remand was, ironically, introduced by the last BNP-Jamaat government. Even politician of the stature of Tofael Ahmed, HR activist Shahriar Kabir and historian Muntasir Maman were tortured on remand. Such was its perversity that the former chief justice M Habibur Rahman wrote a piece entitled, 'State is on remand' during the last BNP-Jamaat rule. The HC decision to stay the remand for 'Odhikar's secretary is a decision of respite reflecting also the independence of higher judiciary. Over the years, I am yet to see a credible case resulting out of so-called disclosures obtained under duress while on remand.

The writer is the Convenor of the Canadian Committee for Human Rights and Democracy in Bangladesh.

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR
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A moral question

Shameless self-promotion does no longer astonish us nowadays. The government is robbing the billboards. They have launched a campaign highlighting their achievements in different fields. Most probably, smaller cities and towns will also be flooded very soon with billboards hijacked by the ruling party men. Whether such kind of self adulatory campaign is appropriate is a moral question.

Sanat Singha Goswami
Gaibandha

Finish the DNA test

Many of the Rana Plaza victims' bodies are not identified yet. Their relatives didn't get any financial support so far. In many cases the victims were the only earning members of their families. Losing their only bread earner, all the families are passing miserable days. The relatives of the unidentified victims are eagerly waiting for the DNA test results. I urge the BGMEA and the government to finish the DNA tests on an urgent basis.

M. A. Kashem
Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Look at your own faults

The PM blamed the opposition for the low pass rate in the HSC exam. I would like to ask her, what have they done to improve the quality of education in last few years? Quality teachers are essential for quality education. But we found that less qualified ones were recruited as teachers in the non-government schools and colleges in exchange for huge amounts of money as bribe to the ruling party members of the school committee. It is an open secret. It is also an open secret that teachers have been giving disproportionately high marks in all the subjects in the last few years, (because the government gave them direction to do so) which was also a reason behind these huge number of GPA 5 holders in recent years. So before blaming others, just look at your own faults for once.

Mawduda Hasnin
Raninagar, Rajshahi

Swiss National Day supplement

The Swiss National Day supplement published in your daily on 1st August was very interesting. The subjects covered were briefly: World's largest solar powered boat, water vortices for renewable energy source, nanotechnology for clean drinking water and cleaning up outer space. Ignoring the last one on 'space cleaning', all the others are very suitable and can be easily applicable in Bangladesh.

Engr. S.A. Mansoor
On e-mail

Comments on news report, "Odhikar secy remanded," published on August 12, 2013

Mortuza Huq

I would like to see a commentary by Mr. Mahfuz Anam on the deteriorating human rights situation in Bangladesh.

disqus_

Tarnished the country's image? Does the minister have any idea how he and other dumb ministers and politicians are tarnishing the image of the country?

Vikram Khan

A human rights campaigner in jail, a Nobel laureate under investigation, a newspaper closed down, democracy on the brink of collapse due to lack of responsible governance. Awami League has found an original way to start its election campaign!

Raihan

I am sad and disgusted to see how this government doesn't at all care about human rights and can arrest anyone and do whatever they like. This government is getting worse than BNP.

Bangali

It is another bad act of this disgusting government.

Masood Rahman

Democracy, Awami style. You speak the truth and you will be remanded.

"Extortion takes toll on hawkers" (August 7, 2013)

Ash C.

Not bad at all! Out of 5 to 7 crore extorted from the poor hawkers, 2 - 2.80 crore goes to the police, 1.25 - 1.75 crore to BCL and other AL affiliates and 1.75 - 2.45 crore to their 'helpers'. This shows just a glimpse of what is broadly happening around the country. A real AL achievement indeed and should take a proud place among other AL billboard 'achievements'!

Max

This news should be an eye-opener for those who believe that AL lost 5 city corporations due to the opposition's use of Hefajat.

Snr Citizen

Things are going from bad to worse, if all that is reported is true. Future of next generation is going to be very difficult.

Faisal

When party changes, the people associated with extortion also change. Only the police personnel remain constant. This tells the story of who really is supporting and encouraging extortion.