

Tough punishment in the works

Formalin Act being prepared

AFTER years of advocacy by media, consumers may at long last be looking forward to a piece of good news. According to the draft Formalin Control Act, 2013 that has been prepared, the unauthorised possession, production, import and distribution of the dreaded industrial-grade chemical formalin, could result in imprisonment up to 10 years and a maximum fine of Tk5lacs.

Even the minimum sentencing of at least 5 years should discourage the wholesale usage of formalin as preservative in foodstuffs. What is interesting to note is that, according to the draft, repeat offenders found guilty of using formalin could end up receiving heavier sentences up to 15 years' imprisonment.

The enactment of the law is expected to take place after it is shared with various stakeholders including consumer groups, health practitioners and civil society in general. The Act if promulgated into law would go a long way in addressing the misuse of industrial chemicals in the food chain which has raised health risks exponentially.

Formalin is used in the manufacturing of particle boards, plywood, disinfectants, and in mortuaries, to name but a few. While many developed countries have banned the use of formalin in agriculture, its widespread application is a sordid reality in Bangladesh. According to doctors, the substance destroys the immune system of the human anatomy which could cause brain and blood cancer. It is imperative that the draft Act be enacted into law in the current session of parliament without any further delay.

Ferry services at a standstill

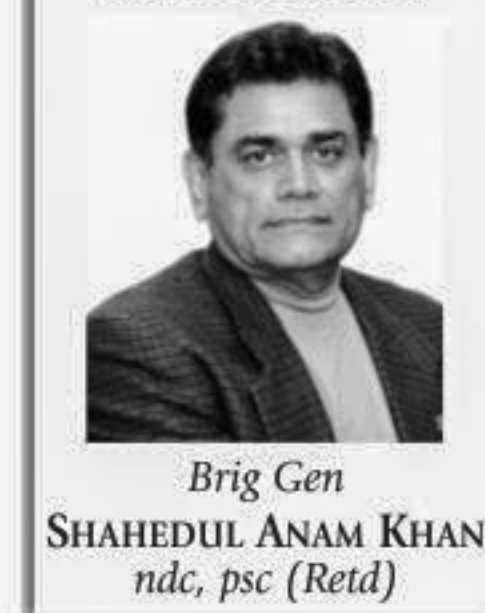
Preparedness is key

THE Paturia-Daulatdia route is the latest in a series of routes where ferry services have had to be halted starting from the rainy season. Low navigability, fierce currents and the rapid formation of underwater shoals have forced hundreds of vehicles to take long detours. Less than a week ago, services were suspended for nine hours on the same route. This time, it has been almost two days. Before that, it was the Chandpur-Shariatpur and Mawa-Kewrakandi river routes. Along with the distressed passengers, who are unable to reach their destinations on time, not to mention the sufferings along the way, hundreds of trucks laden with perishable items and goods are also stranded at such times.

As with everything, prevention is better than cure, and in this case, would have saved us much time, money, energy and effort. The monsoons are no surprise for us and preparedness could have mitigated much of the effects of such natural disasters for which we really should be ready by now. At this point, immediate steps must be taken to step up dredging. Instead of blaming each other, the authorities responsible -- the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) and the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation (BIWTC) -- should cooperate and coordinate in their efforts to derive as much of a solution as is possible for the existing as well as possible future such crises, this and every subsequent year.

Bangladesh-US relations: Bangladesh matters

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



Brig Gen
 SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
 nsc, psc (Retd)

THE RE is perhaps no other country in the globe that is so disparate in every measurable way from the US and yet that merits so much attention of the lone superpower than Bangladesh.

The US leaders writing off the country as politically and economically untenable at the time of its birth, and taking all possible measures to see that the predictions came true -- fingers are pointed at the US for its alleged complicity in the

killing of Bangabandhu -- the robustness of the current mutual relations has evinced keen interests of scholars, both at home and abroad

We shall try to address the issue on three basic premises: WHAT (is the state of relationship) WHY (did this state come about -- the historical perspective) and, HOW (long will this state of relationship last). Perhaps the last two merit more attention than the first because explanations of those should help us to chart our future strategy related to the US.

That there has been an unprecedented jump in the bilateral relation over the last few years is an incontrovertible fact. The US is one of the biggest buyers of our readymade garments and thus very deeply associated with how the industry functions. Forty percent of Bangladesh export is with the US and it is perhaps the only country with which we have a favourable balance of trade. US participation in our disaster preparedness efforts including providing aid for developing our infrastructure, its deep involvement in our defense efforts, particularly in the enhancement of our capacity to oversee and manage our maritime boundary and resources, and lastly its shared concern for rise of extremism, stem from the renewed US interest in Bangladesh in the last decade or so. And that interest has found its practical manifestation in the Bangladesh-US partnership Dialogue Agreement signed in 2012.

The natural question that this development provokes is what has changed in the last decade or so that has induced US to close up to Bangladesh. It was described as a place that was becoming 'quite troubling' by Condoleezza Rice, the then US Secretary of State, during her visit to India in March 2005, and which she thought would need the joint efforts of India

and US to sort out.

So why does Bangladesh matter? The answer lies in the fact that geo-strategic developments in the region of South Asia and the Asia Pacific have accorded Bangladesh a degree of importance. Secondly, the change in US attitude is compelled by the realisation, as can be evinced from the 2010 US defense strategy, that the US cannot go it alone, and in its attempt to address the primary security issues, countries like Bangladesh matter.

Although BD-US relations covers entire gamut of socio-economic issues, the focus of the Partnership Dialogue is predominantly defense and security oriented. In this regard two very important factors motivate the US to seek closer relationship with Bangladesh. Firstly, irrespective of public pronouncements of US' policy makers regarding peaceful coexistence with China in the Asia-Pacific, there is growing wariness in US of China's growing clout and influence,

particularly on the smaller countries of South Asia. Secondly, the issue of extremism and terrorism is perhaps the factor for the US in charting the country's foreign policy.

It is therefore no wonder that in the last several years, the US and India have found mutuality of interest in the strategic plane which manifested in the signing of the "New Framework for the US-India Defence Relationship" agreement in July 2005. Needless to say, this agreement had primarily China in mind and which many saw as an alliance that would allow the stronger of the two to dominate the international strategic scenario, particularly in Asia, at the expense of the smaller partner fulfilling a surrogate role only.

In fact, "The robustness of the US-Bangladesh relations runs parallel to an unprecedented upward curve in the trajectory of the India-Bangladesh relationship, which has been lackluster in the recent decades." Coincidence? The question is will Bangladesh, for its part, be willing to play a surrogate role at the expense of its relationship with China?

As for the how long the current state would last, given the peaks and troughs that we have noticed in US relationship with other countries of South Asia, particularly Pakistan, one is constrained to ask how long would US interest in Bangladesh last? And without sounding pessimistic, one must accept the fact that strategic value is time and situation related. That notwithstanding, it is our hope that Bangladesh-US relationship will stand the test of time.

The writer is Editor Op-Ed and Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

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To attack or not to attack: US conundrum on Syria

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

PRESIDENT Obama's decision to seek congressional approval before a reprisal against the Assad regime in Syria for its alleged use of chemical weapons against its own people took the world by surprise. Only a few days before, both President Obama and Foreign Secretary Kerry had spoken in the strongest terms against Assad and had all but pressed the button on the missiles heading toward Damascus. President Obama had declared that the "redline" had been crossed by Syria and it was time that the regime was taught a lesson. The battleships were ready, and many residents in Damascus reportedly were ready to evacuate. But the missiles were not launched, and bombs were not dropped on Damascus or on the presidential palace there.

Political pundits here and abroad have opined that two factors made President Obama change his decision -- the British Parliament's vote against an attack on Syria, and dissension among members of his own Democratic Party in the Congress on starting another war. Although seeking Congressional approval before launching an attack on another country is not obligatory for the president, Obama made a clever move to shift the onus of making the decision on Syria to the Congress. If he were to go war with Syria he would like the majority of members of the Congress (100 Senators and 435 Congressmen) to give him the green signal. Will it happen?

The hand wringing over going to another war in the Middle East had been going on since the civil war in Syria began more than two years ago. Citing examples of supporting rebel causes in Libya and helping to topple Gaddafi there, hawks in the US have been urging President Obama to side with the rebels and help bring down another Middle East dictator. Yielding to growing demands for military support to the rebels at one stage the Obama administration had talked about limited military support to the rebels, which however did not materialise for many reasons.

Unlike Libya, the Syrian civil war proved to be more long lasting as the Assad regime had several advantages in its favour. Primary among these were solid Russian backing, both materially and diplomatically, and support from Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah for a fellow Shiite regime. Disagreement among Arab countries for a common approach toward opposing Assad also helped the regime considerably.

Another factor that contributed to dilly dallying of Western military support (particularly US) for the Syrian rebels was alleged participation in the rebellion by Islamic militants. There were media reports late last year of efforts to introduce Sharia laws in some areas under the control of rebels with al-Qaeda affiliation. These obviously led to fears in the West that weapons, purportedly given to support a rebellion against the Assad regime, could land among groups that are openly against the West. Such a military support could be self-defeating for the US and Western countries. Another distraction came earlier this year from the Egyptian crisis with Morsi's fall and military takeover of that country. The US has more at stake in Egypt than in Syria.

The game changer for Syria has been the regime's alleged use of chemical weapons against its people, and deaths of children and women from the use of such weapons. The horrifying images of such mindless attacks and the victims caused considerable sympathy and outrage in people's mind, giving additional fuel to the hawks for stopping the regime militarily. The most vocal among the Senators and Congressmen have openly urged the president to give an adequate response, by attacking Syria. The doves have been less vocal, but they made it known either in interviews or in surveys that they do not want another war.

Lost in this rhetoric on both sides is the voice of the people, which, in the absence of a referendum, can be heard only from occasional rallies or opinions given through the media. On the surface it would seem the public is divided like the Congress. The country is suffering from fatigue of two wars, and it can ill afford another, either financially or psychologically. People watch and see the sufferings in Syria like they have seen before in similar other countries. But should the US be interested to save and rescue any country because its leader has launched a war on his own people, or because groups in that country are engaged in an internecine war? Unfortunately, the hawks do not care for public opinion; their focus is on a strategic interest that common people cannot relate to.

A decision on whether to launch a US attack on Damascus will probably be known in a week after both houses have gone through the deliberations in their respective Foreign Affairs Committees. The most recent survey by the Washington Post (September 3) reveals that out of 100 Senators about one third are either against it or leaning toward opposing the attack. The rest are either undecided or favour the attack. In a survey of 189 Congressmen less than half were either against the war or leaning toward opposing it. More than half of the surveyed Congressmen are either undecided or favour the war.

The survey may not reflect the final outcome of the Congress vote, but the future of the war in Syria and the people affected by it is riding on this outcome and the president's decision following the vote. The civil war in Syria has caused more than 100,000 deaths in two and half years, and has turned over two million people into refugees in neighbouring countries. The US is between a rock and a hard place in choosing an option. A complete non-response will further bolster the criticism of the president for his failure to stop a brutal dictator, and encourage continued oppression of Syrian people. On the other hand, a military response and attack on Syria will be viewed by critics of the US as another brazen attempt to destroy a Muslim country. The irony is that the latter critics do not appreciate how the Syrian regime is itself leading the country to destruction by its own action.

The US Congress may endorse Obama's plan of action or it may not. Finally, Obama may or may not act according to the Congress recommendation. All we can hope for is a sane approach to end this insane war. A new war may not be the right answer.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Party chiefs should talk

Tension is mounting as the incumbent government is almost at the end of its tenure. But still both the ruling party and the main opposition are at variance with each other over the composition of the poll-time administration. Neither the premier nor the BNP chief has yet budged an inch from their respective stances. The ongoing political situation is being fuelled by some politicians who are making rabble-rousing remarks every now and then.

The political situation of the country has become more volatile. People are getting anxious about their life and property. Under these circumstances, we, the common mass, request the chiefs of either party to avoid any subversive situation and hold talks for the peace and prosperity of the country.

Md Sairul Islam
 Lecturer in English
 Jahangirpur Girls' School and College
 Mohadevpur, Naogaon

Driven by confusion

Perhaps the ruling AL's decision-makers are now suffering from the severe trauma caused by devastating defeats in the last CC elections. Two instances may be cited in support of the contention.

It is really unbelievable how the 'talented' ruling party decision-makers could jump at grabbing thousands of billboards at Dhaka city without the permission of the advertising agencies! The idea behind this billboard blitzkrieg was to 'mesmerise' the citizens by digitally highlighting the government's achievements! Their eagerness to salvage the government's sinking popularity childishly ignored the illegality of the drive. Another glaring instance of confused decision-making is the unusual postponement of mayoral elections in three municipalities even after announcement of polls-schedules as desired by the LGRD ministry. One can easily guess that the shadow of defeat still haunts the bewildered ruling party bosses.

Let us hope that the ruling party decision-makers will soon recover from any 'obsession' and take sensible and realistic decisions for the party.

Md. Mohsin Ali
 Nutan Courtpara, Kushtia

Criminals hold sway

The other day at 11.30 pm I took a CNG from Banani to go to my residence at old town. Before I could cross the Banani flyover, the driver stopped the CNG. Within seconds two men forcefully entered my vehicle and pointed guns at me. I was forced to give them all the cash I had with me. They beat me as I refused to give them my debit card pin code. But finally I gave in to their demand. One of them suggested, "Put some molom (ointment) in his eyes and ditch him on the Gazipur highway to be run over by rushing vehicles." I implored, "I have small kids and I am the only bread earner of my family. Please do not kill me." They finally left me at Ashulia.

I must say it is good that our leaders do not follow Hazrat Omar's (RadiAllahu Anha) example to check upon the condition of their countrymen. If they did, they would face public wrath every day for not curbing the insecurity, lawlessness, and criminal activities prevailing in the society.

Iqbal Ali Khan
 Director, Admin and Customer relations
 Naseem Group

Comments on news report, "JS to exist, but not in session," published on September 3, 2013

MH Khan
 This is a good idea. There must not be a vacuum. The elected body should stay effective till the newly elected parliament is formed. The presence of the JS will deter unconstitutional forces from making undemocratic moves. This will go a long way in ensuring smooth transition of power democratically. What the nation needs is uninterrupted democracy.

Abul Kashem
 In any case, AL is not interested to take risk to lose power.

Nds
 We are waiting with our fingers crossed to see how smooth the transfer of power will be.

K Ashfaq
 "If voted to power again, my government will ensure decentralisation of power by further strengthening the local government system." If this is true, then why are the local bodies complaining?

Sheikh Monirul Islam, Opee
 How on earth an existing cabinet stays on and continue right through the poll time? How does a democratic process develop when existing MPs and cabinet members are authorised to exercise their full authority?

"Hurt deep down Buddhist heart"
 (September 3, 2013)

S. M. Iftekhar Ahmed
 Hypocrisy prevails in Bangladesh, thanks to the corrupt and amoral politicians. Otherwise, how can it be possible for villains to be portrayed as great heroes?

Vikram Khan
 It's true that the culprits are protected by the politicians, the police force and the local administration. Does the government really think that they can bring justice by rebuilding a temple?

Shahin Huq
 It is now clear that local AL leaders were the master-minds of the Ramu temple attack. Ironically, Awami intellectuals always try to make BNP-Jamaat-Hefazat scapegoats for such crimes. Any independent inquiry will suggest that AL people have been behind most minority oppression in Bangladesh.

THE BRUNEI TIMES

Obama risks more isolation

EDITORIAL

US President Barack Obama speaking at an anti-Iraq war rally in Chicago on October 2, 2002, had said: "I am not opposed to all wars. I'm opposed to dumb wars."

Isn't it a great irony that the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, who opposed the Iraq war, is hell-bent on pushing America into a dumb and senseless military intervention, which lawmakers in his own Democratic Party fear could drag the country into a new Middle East conflict.

Ironies and contradictions do not end here. It was the same Obama who, as a presidential candidate, had criticised George W. Bush for a "cowboy" foreign policy, an "imperial" presidency, and for alienating allies and taking America into war with cooked up intelligence. Now, President Obama is on the verge of repeating the same mistake.

Though the UN inspectors are yet to submit their report on the use of chemicals weapons in Syria, Russia has vehemently challenged the US claim on chemical weapons and the British parliament has already rejected any kind of military intervention, Obama is adamant on what he calls "limited and narrow" action against the Bashar al-Assad regime.

Facing growing isolation, the president has taken a great risk by going to the US Congress for military strike approval. If he does not get the authorisation from Congress, he will not only look more isolated but also weak.

Unilateral military actions against any state or entity should be taken after thorough deliberations and with international consensus which, in this case, means approval from the United Nations. We have seen how the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have resulted in bloodshed and human misery.

Obama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009 for his "extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy." He should pursue diplomacy rather than war.

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