

Wasa's move for more surface water

Welcome, but rivers around Dhaka neglected

NOBODY will contest the concerns for switching to surface water as overuse of groundwater is having a dangerous impact through land subsidence. This makes the city vulnerable to devastation in case of any serious earthquake. Besides, there are severe water deficits to be met through installation of more surface water plants at suitable locations. The decision of Wasa to reduce dependency on groundwater from 78 per cent to 30 per cent in seven years, belated though it is, is well taken.

That Wasa is contemplating to have three new plants by piping water from Padma and Jamuna is welcome in principle but the sewerage aspect of Wasa's functioning points our attention to the polluted and stinky waters of four rivers encircling Dhaka.

Buriganga, Shitalakhya, Balu and Turag were once the lifeline of Dhaka but have since turned into a tightening, pollution-laced noose around the city's windpipe. One wonders how the river-belt around Dhaka city, a rare natural endowment, once comparable to Venice, has been allowed to progressively deteriorate into a moribund state. This is an unacceptable situation that can be rolled back into life like in some major cities in the neighbourhood.

The continual inattention and inaction of our authorities to Buriganga, Shitalakhya, Balu and Turag have to be replaced with high priority accorded to restoration of the dying rivers. We are insistent on this recalling the blatant defiance of the repeated SOS from media and civil society, High Court's directives and Prime Minister's orders to save the rivers before it is too late.

Madhubagh slum blaze

Need for safe homes

YET another city slum has been burnt to ashes leaving 347 families homeless and a two-and-half-year old child dead. The Madhubagh slum in Dhaka city was one of many other such shanties where CNG drivers to garments factory workers find homes.

These unplanned slums around Dhaka follow no safety rules or regulations. The concept of a slum is discouraged by City Corporation as it is. Hence everything that comes with the formation of a slum rarely follows any guidelines to prevent hazards, such as fire.

Slums are strewn with many inflammable materials apart from illegal and exposed electrical wiring. Firefighting is rendered difficult because of constricted access. The victims are living under open sky and in utter destitution. They need immediate relief followed by sympathetic visits by people in authority.

Some authority should be designated to monitor the growth of slums and sensitise the people about basic fire safety precautions.

The victims of the fire will find other slums to live in. They can only hope that such incidents do not recur in their new home. But of course there will be no guarantee, unless structures are built and measures are taken to protect the residents from fire, and appropriate ministries recognize the need for safe homes for Dhaka dwellers and create space for safer living.

Saga of bumper potato

TAYEB HUSAIN

IT is not often we hear good news from Bangladesh. Recently I was very delighted to learn that Bangladesh had a bumper potato harvest. But my joy evaporated after I read the whole news. This year's bumper harvest has caused the prices to fall so low that the poor farmers can't get even their investment back, and some of the produce of their hard work have been left in the fields to rot. Many will be economically ruined and bankrupt. That is very sad, and if our government and we were a little wiser and prudent things could have been different.

Is Bangladesh self-sufficient in food? No, certainly not. And what is our staple diet? Mostly rice. Quite surprisingly, Bangladesh is the 4th largest producer of rice in the world and, I assume, it is also the country with highest per capita consumption of rice in the world. We eat too much rice, 4 times more rice per meal than a normal Scandinavian consumes, I have observed. Most of our people eat rice 3 times a day. Sadly, we do not even consider that there are many other things in Bangladesh that we can eat as substitute for rice and remain very healthy. Potato is such a product and it can help to some extent in solving our food scarcity. It is the staple food in many countries in Europe. It is much tastier and contains more nutrients than rice. Some say potato is the best of all staple diets. Potato contains potassium, calcium, sodium, copper, manganese, phosphorus, iron, pantothenic acid, vitamin A, B and C. It has no saturated, polyunsaturated or monounsaturated fat. Potato has no cholesterol and contains 8% dietary fiber and more sugar than rice. Considering all above, we should encourage our farmers to grow more potatoes, and the government can help them greatly by buying potatoes directly from them. Farmers' associations buy farm goods in many developed countries and in such cases price for a produce is fixed by considering the following factors: "Total investment for the produce + hours the farmer has worked to produce it + reasonable salary per hour + reasonable profit."

Bangladesh can follow the above model and buy the potato to the country produces and thereby build-up a system of food security.

Yawning trust gap at RU

KALEIDOSCOPE



SYED FATTAHUL ALAM

general students.

The media reports initially focused on police brutality and the brazen display of arms by BCL activists. This triggered the predictable knee-jerk response from the ruling AL leadership aiming to defend what its student front, BCL, had done while at the same time take some face-saving measures. The theory of infiltration into BCL and other familiar rhetoric laced with blame game continued all the same.

But what the AL leadership, or the government for that matter, failed to see was that it was an issue in which general students', not of a particular political group's, interest was involved. The AL leadership should have been more circumspect about the issue before taking an instant stance in favour of any of the parties in the fray. They should have questioned the RU authority's mindless action against general students' protest rally. The RU administration's hurried decision to close the university sine die, asking students to vacate their dormitories within a short notice, showed how indifferent and insensitive it was towards the residential students' problems. The government did not care to look into these issues at all, but was gung ho about defending the indefensible which only complicated the matter further.

The gun-toting BCL cadres' behaviour was reprehensible. Equally inexcusable was the abandon with which the police used disproportionate force against the students who were only holding a peaceful protest march within the precincts of the university.

Unfortunately, the government did not give a damn about what the protesting general students of RU had to say. Were all those students anti-AL or anti-government?

The government should rather focus on the real issue of why the university administration was so impatient and insensitive towards the students' grievances so much so that it had to call police and silence them through using brute force. And what was the mystery behind the armed BCL cadres' getting involved in the violence? Did they join the police to suppress the dissenting students just out of fun, or that they were asked by someone in authority to do so? What has the RU administration to say in this regard?

The RU administration is caught up in a mess of its own

creation, but it is unfairly making the general students pay the price for that.

Tuition fees hike is a serious matter. Whatever justification it may have, the university administration cannot just impose it on the students unilaterally and in an arbitrary manner. The students have also the right to know why and under what circumstances such a decision has been taken. The university administration has utterly failed to take the general students into confidence in the matter. Worse yet, it has behaved in the most undemocratic manner by resorting to force rather than dialogue in resolving the dispute. Clearly, there is a huge communication gap between the general students and the university authority.

So, it is hardly surprising that the university authority is becoming more and more dependent on the police and its henchmen to deal with issues relating to general students' interests.

The Daily Star report on RU, as mentioned at the beginning of the write-up, has also laid bare the real reasons behind the RU authority's decisions like tuition fees hike and running of evening courses on commercial basis. As narrated in the report, those measures were geared to meet the huge fund deficit that the university has

been running since long. But why must the student agree to pay from their pocket to finance a deficit the creation of which is not their fault, but of the questionable, often partisan, decisions that the RU administration had taken in the past to recruit teachers and other staff without taking mandatory approval from the University Grants Commission (UGC)? Again, why should the general students allow their teachers to get busy with the



easy money earning projects in the name of special courses?

These were valid points of difference between the common students and the university administration. Evidently, the RU authority did not give any thought to the possibility of resolving the problem through discussions with the general students. But they should now begin to think in this line. To that end, it must open the university as well as its residential halls and restore normality on the campus as soon as possible.

The RU authority must avoid its dependence on external forces for resolving disputes with students. And to build rapport with general students, it should arrange for holding elections to the students' representative bodies, i.e., the student unions.

It is worthwhile to note that like RU, other public universities are also facing a similar trust gap between the administration and the common students. The gaps should be bridged by allowing students to play a greater role in the affairs of the university, especially in the areas that have to do with general students' interests.

ANDREW HAMMOND

WITH the inauguration of the 2014 Winter Olympics, President Vladimir Putin has high hopes that a successful event will enhance the international reputation of Russia. As a project of the utmost personal importance for Putin, an estimated \$51 billion has been spent making these Olympics easily the most expensive in history, and more than three times as costly as the London 2012 summer games.

Ironically, it is partly because of this lavish spending (which has spawned allegations of corruption and cronyism) that Sochi is unlikely to have the positive public relations impact for Russia that Beijing 2008 and London 2012 did for China and London respectively. Indeed, there is a risk that Sochi could become the most controversial Olympics ever.

To be sure, other winter and summer games have also had significant tensions, and some have even been boycotted, such as the last Olympics in Russia (1980 in Moscow), following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. While there will be no such major boycotts this time around, the Sochi games are nonetheless raising headlines mainly for the wrong reasons, ranging from concerns about the damage to the environment from construction of key infrastructure; the threat of terrorism; and protest at Russia's new homosexuality law.

On the gay rights issue, some athletes have also criticised the International Olympic Committee and key sponsors for not pressing this more publicly with Putin. However, for the president, this legislation is part of a wider, populist political agenda in Russia of defending what he views as traditional family values and opposing gay marriage.

But he has promised these positions will not influence Russia's administration of the Olympics and has attempted to defuse the homosexual rights issue with a twin track strategy. Firstly, he clumsily indicated that gays are welcome in Sochi provided that they "leave children in peace" (implicitly equating homosexuality with paedophilia).

He has been more sure-footed, however, with a carefully timed series of amnesties and pardons for high-profile imprisoned figures, including the former Yukos head Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the Pussy Riot band members; and numerous Greenpeace activists charged for hooliganism after an Arctic oil drilling protest. These moves are tactically astute by Putin as international protest at the continued imprisonments could have marred the games. Instead, the amnesties and pardons have, at least partially and temporarily, muted some of the president's human rights critics, both domestically and internationally.

Nonetheless, the gay rights issue will not go away, and this is likely to be evident to the estimated 3.5 billion watching the event on television. One reason for this is that US President Barack Obama and some other world leaders have already declined to attend Sochi, some of them partly for human rights reasons.

A second reason why this issue will not disappear is that gay rights campaigners, some of whom assert Sochi is reminiscent of the 1936 games in Nazi Germany which took place in an atmosphere of anti-Semitic backlash, will wear branded clothing highlighting Principle 6 from the

Olympic charter. Principle 6 articulates the Olympic movement's opposition to all forms of discrimination.

The games have also come under financial-related criticism. Aside from allegations of corruption and cronyism, there is the almost farcical expenditure by the organisers on huge masses of artificial snow. A large number of snow making devices have been brought in, plus an estimated half a million cubic metres of snow from last year has been 'put on ice' for use during the Olympics.

Such extraordinary measures are necessary because Sochi is in fact a sprawling sub-tropical sea resort which, through massive reconstruction works, has been shaped into an Olympic site. While snow-related sporting events will be held at Krasnaya Polyana in the Caucasus mountains, the temperature of Sochi itself is typically mild in winter with warm to hot summers.

According to the 2010 Russian Census, Sochi city has a permanent population of around 350,000 and the infrastructure for it and surrounding areas have, therefore, needed to be massively revamped to handle the large number of athletes and visitors this month. One other key source of controversy surrounds the potential for terrorist attacks, despite the massive security forces manning the Olympics sites. Putin has amassed numerous enemies, especially in the troubled North Caucasus.

Predictably, therefore, perhaps the principle threat of attack is seen to be from Islamist militants from the North Caucasus. Chechen rebel leader Doku Umarov has encouraged such speculation by encouraging his forces to focus on attacking Sochi.

Given the extraordinary security measures in place,

Sochi may itself prove to be safe during the Olympics. However, as the suicide bombings in Volgograd last December and October underline, the threat of terrorism remain clear and present in Russia, and another city (or cities) could be targeted in forthcoming days.

For all of these reasons, it is unlikely that the Sochi games will provide Russia's reputation with a major international 'bounce'. The fortunes of 'Brand Russia' have been on the wane in many international surveys in recent years, and this seems unlikely to change significantly in 2014.

While international indifference to Sochi may prove embarrassing for Putin, it will not mean his abject failure with this highly personal project. On the contrary, should the Olympics prove a success, it could prove a key moment in his attempts to consolidate domestic support in Russia. Putin is acutely aware that his potential re-election in 2018, should he choose to stand again, is not necessarily the foregone conclusion it was in previous ballots.

In this context, holding an Olympics that is well regarded within Russia itself could prove a pivotal point in a long re-election campaign that could see Putin remain in power until 2024. If this were to happen, he would have achieved the truly remarkable feat of being prime minister or president for more than two decades, a longer period at the top of the political system than all the former Soviet Union's supreme leaders, except Joseph Stalin.

The writer was formerly a Geopolitics Analyst at Oxford Analytica, and a Special Adviser in the UK Government of Tony Blair.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Make Dhaka look better before T20 World Cup

The T20 World Cup Cricket is set to kick off in Bangladesh on February 16. The government has approved taka 115 crore for the improvement of road infrastructure and beautification of Dhaka city ahead of this mega event. I would like to request the authorities to replace the present dim sodium lights on the Dhaka streets with brighter ones such as the lights used on the Mohakhali flyover. At least the street lights from the airport to the Shahbag crossing, and again from the Shahbag crossing to the Sher-e-Bangla Stadium may be replaced. Also the street lights around the stadium and at Gulshan and Banani may be replaced. I am mentioning Gulshan and Banani because besides the two five star hotels, almost all the guest houses are located in that area. Many cricket lovers who will come from other countries to watch the game will stay in those hotels and guest houses. After sunset Dhaka looks dull and its streets become unsafe because of insufficient street lights. T20 matches will be played day-night. Brighter lights will not only make the city look better, at the same time they will make the streets and the stadium area safer for the cricket fans both domestic and international.

Faruque Hasan
Uttara, Dhaka

Privatising courts!

This refers to the report, "Turkey MPs to debate more web curbs" (Feb. 6). Had it been a country in the Middle East, nobody would have raised eyebrows, but a European nation like Turkey planning to curb freedom of expression on the web, has come as a surprise. Turkey should keep alive its democracy. As far as judicial reforms are concerned, Turkey should take a cue from another European nation -- the UK, where the government is toying with the idea of privatising courts, and what is more surprising, even the judiciary in the UK is willing to embrace the idea, subject to important safeguards. The idea behind this move is to increase the revenue and investments in courts.

Deendayal M. Lulla
Mumbai, India

Comments on post editorial, "Grievous accusations, predictable reactions," published on February 07, 2014

Habibur Rahman

There's no point to disagree with the author's view. But it's a distant possibility that the incumbent authority will pay any heed to your call. Because we all know in Bangladesh winners need not justify their deeds. After the farcical election of Jan 5, it's clear that AL won the political duel and they think whatever they are doing now is for the betterment of the country, be it extra-judicial killing or any other act. We belonging to the new generation are really disappointed. A strong civil society is what is needed most at the moment.

Ash C.

Shouldn't the entire media world along with The Daily Star, dear Mr. Anam, get together to form immediately a common platform for the establishment of rule of law and democracy in Bangladesh, instead of being divided into various camps to serve the purpose of various quarters, particularly the ruling party?

A freedom fighter

According to a BNP leader his party was in a 'war'. In that war the BNP workers embraced 'martyrdom'. But the innocent citizens who were not participating in the 'war' were burnt to death by BNP foot soldiers. They had no stake in the 'war'. Who should face the trials for these deaths?

BNP terms govt, 10th JS illegal (February 08, 2014)

Molla A. Latif

The Sheikh Hasina government and the 10th. parliament is illegal, immoral and unconstitutional, according to the BNP and the only reason is that "people had spontaneously rejected the January 5 election". But there is no legal explanation why so. So, the demand for a fresh election is rather illegal, immoral and unconstitutional, because people are still with Sheikh Hasina's government spontaneously.

Zman7

Any people in the world (save BNP-Jamaat) may comment on the Jan 5 election, 10th JS or the new government. But how on earth the Jamaat-backed BNP -- that boycotted the election and left no stone unturned (including massive violence on the Election Day) to stop the election -- claims that the government and the 10th parliament are "illegal, immoral and unconstitutional"?