

## Chemical shop fire

## Why the recurrence?

OUR individuals died and many more have been badly injured in Tejturi Bazar fire on Thursday. Reports relating to the hazards posed by factories and chemical workshops situated in residential areas have appeared regularly in the media. Despite all the concerns expressed over the years and court orders to free residential areas of chemical stores, no effective compliant measures have neither been enforced nor taken.

What has happened in Tejturi Bazar is simple: an open 200-litre paint thinner barrel developed a fire and the flames simply leapt out of the shop and into the narrow alley. The intensity of the fire could be seen from the manner in which the flames affected passersby. As for those inside the shop, apart from the individuals who have died, their normal breathing ran into problems. As a medical expert at DMCH put it, the hot gases burnt the breathing tracts of the affected individuals.

The question now is: How much more time must elapse before real and effective action is taken against elements who allow parts of their homes to be used as shops where dangerous chemicals may be in use? Apart from that, when will purposeful action be demonstrated to ensure safety measures for shop employees?

Whatever suggestions have been made by experts should be revisited on a priority basis and a strategy adopted to implement those within a specified timeline under the watch of a clearly designated authority. We cannot be mute spectators to deaths of unsuspecting people through avoidable accidents.

## Racket surrounding Padma Bridge

## Fraudulent job offers must be dealt with

RAUDSTERS are approaching the poor people of different districts with promises of recruitment for the future construction of Padma Bridge. Needless to say, this is a project that has yet to be finalised and whatever promises being made are totally baseless. That these cheats are making use of fictitious Bridges Division forms to trick poor people of precious savings anywhere between Tk. 5,000 and Tk. 30,000 is worrying enough. That advertisements have been published in some dailies stating that 40,000 people will be recruited over a period of four years has caused false hope for future employment. Basically how could such a scam get started in the first place?

We urge the authorities to take concrete steps against the gangs that are active in a number of districts so that they are stopped in their tracks. It may not be surprising that victims are unwilling to come forward to name culprits in the fear of being deleted from the fabled list of those who dream of work in the project. Given that the targeted populace come from poor backgrounds with little by way of education, their hopes for landing a construction job on such a big project are set to be dashed. It is precisely the hunger of jobs fraudsters take advantage of. Since the authorities are seized of the issue, law enforcement agencies should bust these criminal rings so as people are no longer shortchanged.

## Watching the money flow

EDITORIAL: THE HINDU (INDIA)

IN line with the constitutional mandate to curb the corrupting influence of money power in elections, the Election Commission of India (ECI) has issued detailed guidelines and set up an elaborate administrative machinery to monitor the expenses of candidates and ensure a free and fair poll. The ECI's detailed compendium of instructions on Election Expenditure Monitoring (ECM) that is updated and issued before every general election, has come on top of hikes effected in the election expenditure limit for each parliamentary constituency to Rs.70 lakh from Rs.40 lakh for the bigger States based on a formula linked to a cost inflation index. The bulky ECM compendium, that deals with matters ranging from maintenance of accounts by each candidate, training of election agents on expenditure monitoring, maintenance of registers, appointment of election expenditure observers for each constituency and preparation of daily activity reports by flying squads on seizure of cash and so on, to norms for political parties and even "the language in which the accounts of election expenses may be filed," is bewildering in terms of its details.

Apart from the irritation some of these norms could cause to normal and bona fide day-to-day cash-carrying transactions by even ordinary citizens and businesses, the most hotly contested rule now, amidst the poll campaign, relates to adding the costs of campaigning by party leaders and star campaigners to the expenditure of individual candidates. The demands on time made on and security considerations of VIP leaders who campaign for their respective political parties require a certain mode of campaigning that includes the use of aircraft and helicopters. This invariably involves high-cost logistics, besides expenses on special platforms and enclosures prescribed by security agencies to ensure protection. If the ECI accepts the basic logic that expenditure on 'general propaganda' of political parties should not be added to candidates' expenditure, then it implies that some allowance needs to be made for their 'star campaigners' who lead those political parties. The general propaganda of political parties cannot logically exclude campaigning by leaders. Or else, it results in an anomalous situation of 'star campaigners' like Sonia Gandhi, Narendra Modi and Jayalalithaa having to campaign sans their party candidates. The leaders cannot even mention the names of a candidate, lest the candidate be burdened with a bill that includes the travel costs of the leaders and overshoots the ceiling. The experience with such a rule, as highlighted by Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa and Union Finance Minister P. Chidambaram, should prompt the ECI to revisit the

## SUNDAY POUCH



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

**S**o many important events are taking place around the world nowadays. There is the matter of Crimea joining Russia unilaterally. As a sequel, there is the so-called interference by Russia in eastern Ukraine where Russian speaking people of ethnic origin reside. Then there is the stalling of Middle East peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians which the USA is helping to broker. US relations with China are increasingly getting sour with issues that impinge on their bilateral

relations. Also, US is yet to ease diplomatic tension created by expulsion of an Indian diplomat from US and the resignation of US ambassador to India due to the failure to limit the embarrassment by US. Finally, there is the weak and timid response by the US to the Syrian fiasco in the face of Russia's posture. The US could not put together a coalition of Syrian opposition forces to combat President Assad and his army.

It is thought by millions around the world that the US is still the only superpower which has the means to subdue or contain more than two major international crises simultaneously anywhere in the world. It also has diplomats who are able to go to conflict areas and are able to intervene and resolve issues single-handedly or with its allies. But then why is it not happening? Why is the US seen as a diplomatic dummy when it faces challenging figures like President Putin of Russia and President Xi Jingping of China. It is a curious phenomenon that seems to have emerged in President Obama's second term of office. He does not seem to be as formidable as in his first term of office.

Some say that "US foreign policy under Obama is a bad joke." The interesting part is that everyone knows it, except him and his State Department. President Teddy Roosevelt had a foreign policy which clearly articulated that the US will "walk softly and carry a big stick." Is USA on a similar path now? US public opinion about Obama's foreign policy is also not in his favour. In fact, according to opinion makers "they are not proud of it and they are not grateful to him for giving them what they want." It is said in US now that "to follow a leader to triumph inspires loyalty, gratitude and affection. Following a leader in retreat inspires no such emotion." The people of US are following the role played by Obama in Ukraine and Syria. They seem to be quite disappointed. Many have accused Obama of being timid and ineffective in wielding American influence.

So what do the people of US want? Do they seek "the

good old times" when the US acted as the global policeman and threw its weight around. Do they want to return to the time when every leader of the world kept quiet as the US president spoke. But a deep examination of the present foreign policy establishment in Washington and what it is thinking will make things clear. It is a fact that US still spends more on its military than what is spent by all other nations of the world combined. Obama has not reduced it. But the president has realised that Americans are bruised from more than a dozen years of war and he is not willing to participate in more wars and occupations. The US, even though it seems isolated from the world, is indeed more engaging as Washington pivots towards Asia. It has been deploying bigger naval forces around the world and around its new rival China. There are also the US transnational drone wars and its worldwide surveillance programme.

The Obama administration is in the cusp of a new and exciting world order where new actors are emerging and challenging the US. These actors do not carry any ideological baggage as in the past. They are enthused by ethnic, nationalistic and economic reasons. This is evident when we see the events that led to what has happened in Syria and Crimea. Obama's supporters, therefore, applaud his cooperation with allies like Nato and his multi-lateralism. They also applaud his ending the Iraq war and the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. His attempts to destroy the core leadership of al-Qaeda terrorist group are appreciated.

Obama has five key features to his foreign policy: "Bringing a responsible end to the war in Iraq," "building the first truly 21st century military and showing wisdom as to how to deploy it;" "marshalling a global effort to meet a threat that arises above all and securing, destroying and stopping the weapons of mass destruction;" "rebuilding and constructing the alliances and partnership necessary to meet common challenges;" and "while helping others build more secure societies, America must not force that citizens of these nations can sustain them."

So, in effect, Obama has chalked out a mature and time befitting foreign policy that, according to the foreign policy establishment, uses 'smart power' -- the full range of tools at US disposal, diplomacy, economic, military, political, legal and cultural. For each global situation, the US now seems to pick the right tool or combination of tools to face any coming eventuality. Hence, Obama's anemic looking foreign policy is not so anemic if looked at closely. But as a wise man once said: "Change your thoughts and you change the world." This is perhaps what Obama is doing.

The writer is a former Ambassador and a commentator on contemporary affairs.  
E-mail: ashfaque303@gmail.com

## Common rivers issue: Is JRC delivering?

M. INAMUL HAQUE

**T**HE Bengal Basin lies on the confluence of three major rivers -- Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna. The Ganga basin has 1,087,000 sq. km catchments area -- 860,000 sq. km lies in India, 147,480 sq. km. in Nepal, 33,520 sq. km in China, and 46,000 sq. km in Bangladesh. The Brahmaputra River has 532,000 sq. km catchments area -- 270,900 sq. km lies in China, 47,000 sq. km in Bhutan, 190,000 sq. km in India, and 24,100 sq. km in Bangladesh. The Meghna River has 102,000 sq. km catchments area -- 51,000 sq. km lies in India, 1,000 sq. km in Myanmar, and 50,000 sq. km in Bangladesh. Because of this, Bangladesh has many common rivers with its neighbours.

The Joint Rivers Commission (JRC) was established in Dhaka pursuant to the joint declaration of the prime ministers of India and Bangladesh on March 19, 1972. There is a counterpart JRC for India based in New Delhi. The minister of water resources is the ex-officio chairman of the Commission on each side. The JRC started its activities as an independent organisation in 2000, under the Ministry of Water Resources. It monitors flows of 57 trans-boundary rivers (54 with India and 3 with Myanmar) on an annual basis. According to the website of JRC, its activities include:

- Negotiating with the co-riparian countries on development, management and sharing of water resources of common rivers;
- Meeting with India at different levels on sharing of waters of common rivers, transmission of flood related data, river bank protection works along common/border rivers etc.;
- Monitoring and sharing of the Ganga/Ganges waters at Farakka, India, and at Hardinge Bridge, Bangladesh, from January 1 to May 31 as per the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty, 1996;
- Working jointly with Nepal for harnessing common water resources, mitigating floods and flood damages, and conducting research and technical studies;
- Co-operating with China in the field of water resources, enhancing the flood forecasting capability through exchange of flood related data and information keeping in mind the principles of equality and fairness, conducting training in the relevant technical field, etc.;
- Principles of equality and fairness, conducting training in the relevant technical field, etc.;
- Working jointly with co-riparian countries on hydro-power development and water resources management under sub-regional co-operation.

According to its website, the JRC has held 37 meetings since its establishment in March 1972. Several other meetings at various levels were also held. The issues mainly addressed at those meetings are as follows:

- Sharing waters of common rivers;
- Transmission of flood related data from India to Bangladesh;
- Construction and repair of embankments and bank protection works along common/border rivers;
- River interlinking project of India;
- Tipaimukh Dam project of India;
- Mahananda Barrage constructed by India.

No meeting has been held till now after the 37th JRC meeting on March 2010 in Delhi. The 38th JRC meeting was scheduled to be held on September 5, 2011, when a deal on Teesta water sharing was to be signed. It was postponed. Several dates were set afterwards for that meeting, but were postponed on request from the Indian side. The reason for this stalemate is clear: Chief Minister of Paschimbanga Ms. Mamata Banerjee wants to reframe the proposed Teesta agreement, along a line which is not at all agreeable to the Bangladeshi side. Bangladesh wants 20% water for the river and the rest distributed between India and Bangladesh on

50-50 basis. Mamata said: "There is no water in Teesta in lean period, so no water to Bangladesh." Historical records say that the minimum average flow of Teesta is no less than 8,000 cusec towards Bangladesh.

In the 37th JRC meeting in Delhi, Bangladesh Water Resources Minister Ramesh Chandra Roy expressed satisfaction for getting 3,500 cusec of water without asking. After a secretarial level meeting of JRC in Dhaka, in January 2011, it was in the air that the Teesta water sharing agreement was imminent, with the formula of dividing the flow 50-50, keeping aside 20% of the total flow for the river. But The Daily Star on September 3 carried two contradictory reports: one quoting a JRC official in Dhaka, that keeping aside 20% of the total flow for the river, water shall be divided on 48-52 basis for 15 years; the other, quoting PM's advisor Mashru Rahman that, "In fact we do not know how much water is flowing through the Teesta River. We are to measure it for 17 years; then the agreement shall be signed." It was stunning and a matter of great shock. On the same day, Anandabazar Patrika of Kolkata reported that by keeping aside 460 cusec of water, it shall be divided 48-52 between Bangladesh and India. This raised a big question. If 460 cusec is 20%, then the total flow (100%) is 2,300 cusec! In that case, would Bangladesh get 1,104 cusec water only?

After the Hasina-Manmohan Summit in Dhaka, Foreign Affairs Secretary of Bangladesh Mijarul Quayes said on September 8, 2011: "Teesta agreement is finalised; we are not to give any more concessions." Since then, it has remained a mystery. What is there in the document? What is the amount of flow to be distributed? Many days have gone by since the controversy developed in September 2011; JRC has still not yet clarified to the public what was or is the real situation. In the meantime, India has closed the Gazaldoba gates towards Bangladesh, and is diverting all the lean period flow of Teesta towards the Mechi River in Bihar through the Mahananda River. Bangladesh is getting only the regenerated flow from the dry bed downstream, added by the Dhulari River flow coming at Domohoni Bridge.

We often quote Article II of the Helsinki Rules of 1966, which says that 'an international drainage basin is a geographical area extending over two or more states determined by the watershed limits of the system of waters, including surface and underground waters, flowing into a common terminus.' The UN Convention on Non-navigational uses of International Watercourses of 1997 agrees with this definition [Art. 2a]. According to this clause, transfer of water from one watershed basin to other is prohibited. This convention sets out norms on agreements between watercourse states [Art. 3(3)], and those based on negotiating in good faith [Art. 3(5)], and no party can adversely affect uses of another state without the consent of that state [Art. 3(4)]. The convention allows the watercourse states to utilise an international watercourse in an equitable and reasonable manner in their respective territories [Art. 5]. This instrument can definitely settle water disputes with our neighbours.

Bangladesh did a commendable job by approaching the International Tribunal to settle its maritime boundary with Myanmar. Bangladesh is a signatory to the UN Convention on Law of the Seas, but why not to the UN Convention on International Watercourses? This convention is yet to come into force with ratification, acceptance, approval or accession by 35 countries. As on April 8, 2014, 34 countries had done it, one remains. Why is Bangladesh not doing that?

The JRC in Bangladesh is a small unit fully dependent on other departments for data and logistics. It cannot work on its own for its mandate and research. In India, the Central Water Commission, which acts as the secretariat of JRC, is very strong on its own. The JRC in Bangladesh may need reformation and integration with the Hydrology Department of the Water Ministry.

## LETTERS

## TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

## Opposition in JS and Article 70

The JP having members in both the government coalition and the official opposition raises questions around Article 70 of the Constitution which states that MPs voting against their own party must resign from their seats. For example, a bill comes up for vote in the JS. The government members of JP vote in support, but the opposition JP members vote against. Is Article 70 violated, and if so, by whom? The government MPs voting against the party they belong to (JP) or opposition MPs voting against the coalition their party belongs to?

The JP is a pretty tame opposition, illustrated when they set the bar at only opposing anything the government proposes that is "anti-people". Legislation that is not "anti-people" may still need opposition to amend if not necessarily to stop it. The risk is the government could use the threat of Article 70 to keep opposition members from performing the role they need to play.

Neil Taylor  
On e-mail

## Deadly chromium in fish, poultry

Chicken and fish are very rich sources of protein which is necessary for the body. But in our country, poultry and fish feeds are made up of tannery wastes which contain a high amount of chromium. This chromium is stored in the body of chicken and fish. And when we eat these, we also absorb chromium resulting in various health problems such as skin rashes, troubled stomachs and ulcers, respiratory problems, weakened immune system, kidney and liver damage, alteration of genetic material, lung cancer and even death. Children are very vulnerable to this toxic element. So the government should take necessary steps to stop making poultry and fish feeds from tannery wastes.

Sk Zahid  
Applied Chemistry & Chemical Engineering  
University of Dhaka

## Child labourers' plight

It was midday when I met a ten-year-old boy named Sumon who was breaking bricks as he was sweating extremely under the burning sun. A few days back, I found him near an under-construction building at the capital's Hatirjheel area. "If I break bricks from dawn to dusk, I earn one hundred taka. I start my work at nine o'clock. My mother gives me some food that is my lunch. Since my father left us after marrying another woman, my mother used to work as a maid servant. I wanted to go to school but could not because of poverty," said Sumon. His owner said, "Child labourers are better because they never raise their voice about wages and work sincerely."

Stories like Sumon's are very common in this city. It is painful that we are still unable to provide a safe and secure place for them to live.

Bipul K Debnath  
English Department  
Dhaka College

Comments on news report, "Treatment shrouded in questions," published on April 9, 2014

## Deep Purple Blue

How come those who mercilessly beat up Saad accompanied him to the hospital for treatment? They may have further ensured his death. I strongly suggest that the doctors can't wash their hands of this tragic death and should be held to account for negligence.

## Hardreality

The article's claim, "His death put government health service management under scanner" made me optimistic about future for a second, but I came back to reality instantly. It is always the case. We know that doctors treat patients of public hospitals in one way, while the private hospitals in a completely different way and nobody are here to hold them accountable for their negligence in public hospitals. When somebody dies, we hear a lot of outcry. After a few days, when the dusts settle, everybody forget what happened, until the next death occurs.

## Syed Reza Khalek

How many university students will we lose for nothing?

\*\*\*\*\*

**"A giant leap backward"**  
(April 8, 2014)

## Asfisarwar

They did not break the rule or norm. There are no oppositions in the parliament.

## Hardreality

Marching directly towards a 'totalitarian state'! Why would general people take to the street, stage demonstration and sacrifice their lives when all the political parties treat them the same way by lying to people, breaking promises, plundering public money, indulging in corruption and so on?