

Committees can't prevent disasters



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

BITTER TRUTH

IN a country that stumbles upon calamity, mostly man-made, with unerring regularity and embraces disaster with disturbing stoniness, death's sting has long been blunted. For disaster-prone Bangladesh, the blows came in came quick succession. Before people could recover from the shock and grief of a launch disaster that claimed 15 lives when a launch carrying about 60 passengers sank in the Golachipa river during a nor'wester on May 3, another passenger launch M.V. Miraj-4 heading for Shariatpur carrying about 250 to 300 passengers went down in Meghna in Munshiganj on May 15 -- the second launch capsized in just two weeks. According to local administration and fire service quoting locals, around 40 to 50 people could swim to the shore, and death toll stood at about 150. But the saddest part is that, despite availability of two modern rescue vessels, efforts to raise the launch took about 48 hours.

In most of the launch disasters, it is evident that human factors like launch owner's indifference and greed, and the launch driver's incompetence and tendency to flout navigational rules heightened the scale of tragedies. Reports from the survivors of MV Miraj-4, revealed that the launch driver's incompetence, or rather over-confidence, caused the accident. As a violent storm was brewing, passengers requested the captain of the launch to drop anchor at the nearest shore. But he

turned a deaf ear to their entreaties, and the vessel sank during the storm.

Launch disasters are not new, especially in the Dhaka-Barisal, Dhaka-Chandpur and Dhaka-Shariatpur routes in the monsoon season. It is evident that these disasters happen in the month of May when nor'westers batter the coastal region, taking heavy toll of lives on the waterways. With sophistication and innovation in vessel construction lacking, the riverine districts weathered disaster after disaster, and hundreds met a watery death. Even though the country faced catastrophes regularly in the last 12 years, the deaths and disasters could hardly sensitise or jolt the administration to action.

The problem isn't one of resources, but one of leadership, motivation and political will, which are appallingly missing. All these disasters, which have become annual events, reinforce our belief that there is something awfully wrong in the whole system of administration in the inland water transportation sector.

It's no use picturing these tragedies as acts of nature and taking refuge in the old saying that humans are just pawns in the hand of nature. Several thousand people met watery graves in the last one decade while we frittered away our energy and money in grandiose projects that never saw the light of day. In spite of the improvements in digital technology, there is no system to disseminate navigational and meteorological information to the inland water vessels till now.

The concerned ministry has failed to check the river fitness of the vessels plying the waterways of the southern part of the country. Shockingly, both the officials and the owners of the launches have always closed their eyes to the



carrying capacity of the vessels and the engine condition that must be compatible with the load. It has been reported that M.V. Miraj-4, was declared unfit because of its infrastructure incompatibility, but it plied on the river routes taking advantage of the special permission accorded by the ministry of shipping in 2008 to about 57 vessels. And the inevitable has happened.

Other than the incompatibility factor arising from loss of equilibrium due to overloading and flawed design, incompetence of the vessel operators and shoddy inspection of vehicle fitness are largely to blame for the frequent disasters we are facing in the river routes. It was reported that M.V. Miraj-4 was being operated by a novice replacement driver

on that fateful evening.

Whatever the cost factor, no launch should be allowed to ply on the rivers without adequate number of buoys tallying with the number of passengers on board. Rules are not strictly enforced and navigational permits are reportedly given in exchange of kickbacks. Most importantly, there is a big question mark about the skill and experience of the drivers of about 8,000 launches operating in the country. Most accidents occurred because of the total absence of training facilities of the drivers.

The job for the present shipping minister seems to be exacting, because he needs all the political and administrative acumen to extricate himself from the fall-out of the two

recent disasters. In view of the colossal loss of lives and alarming frequency of disasters, the government must without further delay enforce mandatory provision of marine insurance before floating a launch in the river. The measure will automatically discourage overloading of passengers and unhealthy competition in the river routes.

Unfortunately, as the scale of tragedies -- both man-made and natural -- increased during the last ten years, so did our apathy before and after accidents on the highways, fire incidents in factories and launch disasters in the river routes. They were mostly preventable. Yet we never learned our lessons. We have become inured to the sight of human suffering. The big question in people's minds is whether the were natural disasters or accidents due to human negligence.

Most of the launch owners are high profile businessmen who have substantial clout in politics. But it seems that the shipping minister would rather not walk in the corridors where politics is played. Otherwise, how come the recommendations of the enquiry committees formed after every disaster have not been implemented till now?

Preventing accidents is most crucial and must take precedence over anything else. People are inclined to believe that all these accidents happened because of the shoddy construction and faulty design of the vessels, and the corrupt practices resorted to. The question that strikes the public mind is, shouldn't the officials who closed their eyes to what was going on be punished?

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star. E-mail: aukhandk@gmail.com

The line between good and evil

ANIKA HOSSAIN

WE as a society have seen countless acts of violence, torture, terrorism and killing since our inception. Most of these atrocities have been carried out by political entities, law enforcement agencies and, in recent times, in the form of brutal mob killings -- by the ordinary citizen. It is traditionally believed by psychologists that an individual must bring certain internal factors such as personality traits, genetics, moral character and pathological tendencies into situations of violence in order to explain their behaviour. However, some in the field also believe that while this is important, the extent to which situational factors can guide a person's behaviour should also be appreciated.

Let us take for example the incident that took place on April 27, when 7 people were kidnapped and murdered, allegedly by Rab officials. The accused are highly trained members of an elite force and therefore it can be

assumed that they had gone through extensive psychological assessment and been declared mentally stable before they were recruited. Given this assessment, what makes some individuals commit vicious acts of murder?

According to psychologist Philip G. Zimbardo, there are certain steps that lead down a slippery slope from good to evil. The first step that is taken is a mindless, small step. Extreme violence never occurs suddenly, it is a gradual process that can begin with the simple act of slapping someone. In an experiment conducted by psychologist Stanley Milgram, participants did not feel particularly bad about administering an electric shock of 15 Volts on their fellow participants who gave wrong answers in a learning test. Each subsequent shock with each wrong answer was increased by 15Volts "only" -- the key word that made it easier for participants to administer up to 450 Volts of electric shocks on their peers. In Zimbardo's opinion, this experiment provided participants with an ideology to justify their

beliefs for their actions.

De-humanising the victim also enables the aggressor to carry out unthinkable acts of violence. For example, thinking of the victim as animals who deserve subhuman treatment is a strategy extensively used in warfare. Semantically changing their perception of the victims and the act itself can turn an evil act into a benevolent one in the mind of the aggressor. A classic example of this can be seen in Zimbardo's own prison experiment in Stanford, which had to be shut down because the students in the role of prison guards committed unspeakable acts of violence towards those in the role of prisoners.

Self anonymity is also effective in these situations. When a person is anonymous, they are less self-conscious. Zimbardo found that participants who wore a hood or a uniform could administer the electric shocks for a longer time than those not in disguise. In the case of the 7 murders, the Rab uniform could be

a reason for the perpetrators to conform to group behaviour and free themselves of individual blame.

The diffusion of personal responsibility comes with de-individualization. When there is more than one perpetrator or several bystanders during an act of violence, it is easy to assume that someone else will intervene to put an end to it. Therefore, it is easy to rid oneself of personal blame.

Unquestioned obedience to authority can also play a vital role. Turning a once benevolent leader into a dictator can cause individuals to follow orders blindly. In an experiment conducted by Hoffling et al (2006), 21 out of 22 nurses in a real institution administered what they believed to be a fatal dose of drugs to a patient on the supervising doctor's orders. In the case of the alleged Rab killings, the officers may have been following orders from a powerful authority which they followed unquestioningly, either believing in a cause or in fear.

People in positions of power, especially in this country, are rarely held accountable for their actions. The lack of law and order combined with the license to eradicate crime in whichever fashion they find suitable has given law enforcement officers an excuse to abuse this power in the worst possible ways. Extrajudicial killings in "encounters" were once praised and approved of. Loopholes in the legal system and powerful political backing can make an individual practically invincible. Therefore these social factors are currently the most dominant motivators for countless acts of unthinkable violence and these are the issues that must be addressed to bring change.

In Zimbardo's words, "That line between good and evil is permeable. Any of us can move across it.... I argue that we all have the capacity for love and evil -- to be Mother Theresa, to be Hitler or Saddam Hussein. It's the situation that brings that out."

The writer is Sub-Editor, Features Team, The Daily Star.

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

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Yesterday's answer

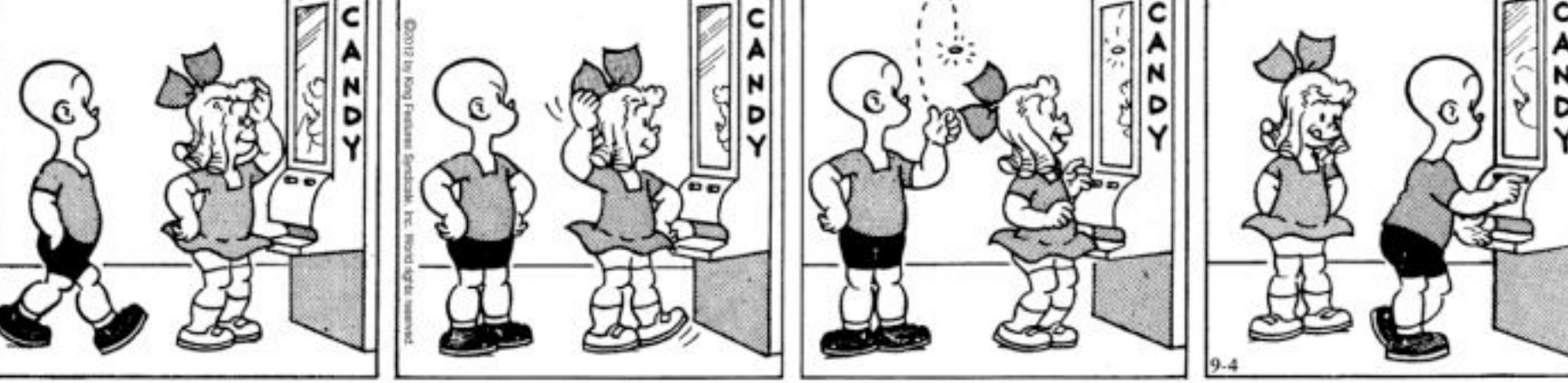
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- ACROSS**
- 1 Thick slices
 - 6 Phoned copies
 - 11 Pink shade
 - 12 Tara family name
 - 13 Wonder land visitor
 - 14 Court rapper
 - 15 Put on the line
 - 17 Road hazard
 - 18 Had lunch
 - 19 Sugar servings
 - 22 Outlaw
 - 23 Electricians, at times
 - 24 Braves legend
 - 25 Country singer Mel
 - 27 Yank's foe
 - 30 "Robocop" and "Total Recall"
 - 31 Punk rock offshoot
 - 32 Mont Blanc, for one
 - 33 Turn
 - 35 Trumpet sound
 - 38 Turn aside
 - 39 Hold, at sea
 - 40 T-shirt choice
 - 41 Fuming
 - 42 Kicked, in a way
- DOWN**
- 1 Sacred beetle
 - 2 Nabokov book
 - 3 Out of bed
 - 4 Fund
 - 5 Somnambulate
 - 6 Sailing hazard
 - 7 Cry of insight
 - 8 Last name of an "X-Men" professor
 - 9 Puts up
 - 10 Company division
 - 16 Some farms
 - 20 Intersection sight
 - 21 Writer Kesey
 - 24 Copying
 - 25 Bank worker
 - 26 Gazelle's cousin
 - 27 Idolize
 - 28 Come into view
 - 29 Ran off
 - 30 Bar mitzvah figure
 - 34 Infamous czar
 - 36 Scoundrel
 - 37 Iris setting

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