

River accidents galore

Failure to punish the guilty appalling

INVESTIGATIVE journalism has revealed the sordid tale of why launch owners could not care less about plying the rivers with unfit vessels that are almost always overloaded with passengers. That the maritime court has now some 35 launch accident cases pending hearing goes to show the lack of interest in bringing those to book responsible for such maritime disasters. Indeed, going by what has been published in this newspaper, we are shocked to learn that almost invariably; all Maritime Court verdicts drag for years in appeals filed by the accused with higher courts in the country.

Putting things in perspective, we find that there have been no less than 390 launch accidents over the last 25 years costing some 3,700 lives; and nearly 500 people remain listed as missing. While these are official statistics, unofficial figures put the number of casualties as high as 5,500. Whatever may be the casualty figure, what has become obvious is that the court in charge of handling such accidents is ill-equipped to carry out its function as there are few marine experts to assess the nature of accident or damage of a maritime incident such as Pinak-6.

What we would like to know is precisely why a single maritime court, lacking in manpower, is expected to look after such incidences of accident that have become a regular feature in the country? No sector can be allowed to wilfully break the law, no matter how powerful its benefactors and it is high time authorities take heed of public interest before private sector profits.

Move to 'define' freedom fighters

Why so late in the day?

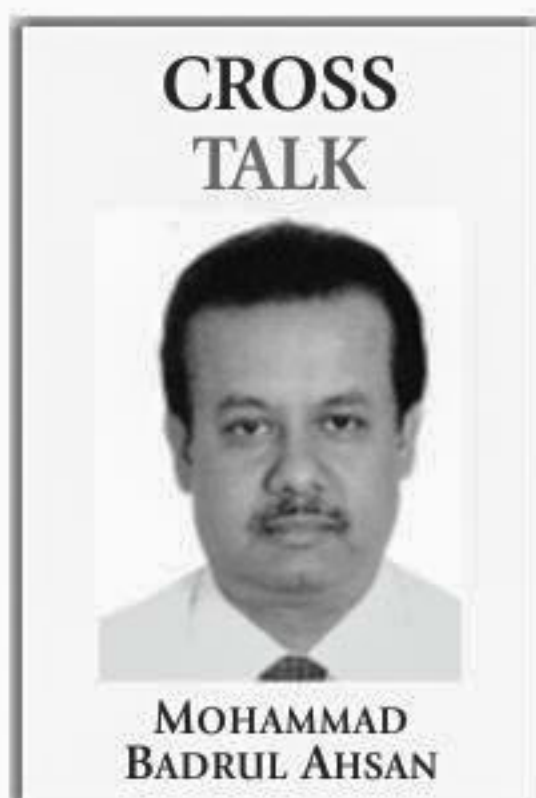
WITH the malpractice of using forged Freedom Fighters' Certificate by public servants becoming pervasive, the government has set itself the task of defining a freedom fighter. And to facilitate identification of true freedom fighters, a sub-committee has been assigned the job.

It's a sad irony that the freedom fighters have to be identified so long after the War of Liberation. This should have been done conclusively immediately after the War of Independence or at a cut-off point reasonably near it. Our failure to do so has allowed many impostors to get on to the list. Successive governments also were not serious about screening out the undesirable elements. It is disgraceful as it is demeaning for the heroes of our Liberation War.

The recently discovered cases of government officials who resorted to forgery to get Freedom Fighters' Certificate to enjoy benefits and privileges due to the war heroes have put the entire nation to shame. But the government has only revoked those fraudsters' illicitly acquired titles as a measure of their punishment. Considering the degree of crime they committed, the punishment was not enough. A deterrent, exemplary punishment was necessary to strike fear in the hearts of existing as well as would-be fakes.

Since some 5,000 others, of whom 300 are government servants, are also learnt to be under investigation for having fraudulently obtained Freedom Fighters' certificates, the government can ill-afford to lower its guard on intruders.

The psychosis of a former dictator



CROSS TALK

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

being in the government and the opposition at the same instance. Outside the party, he is not the main man in the parliamentary opposition. Inside the party, the wife has stolen some of his thunder. It explains why he occasionally chafes against the government like a pressure cooker intermittently whistles to release steam.

One of the defining outcomes of Ershad's politics is that he's no longer taken seriously. People know nothing he says can be final, and his mind fluctuates more frequently than power in the national grid. They know he is at once an illusionist, a stunt performer and an escape artist, who comes closest to being the Harry Houdini of our national politics.

Scientists have concluded lately that the theropod dinosaurs shrank over 50 million years to evolve into small birds. That evolution came inexorably to our former dictator within a much shorter span of time. In fact, he admitted it himself when he said during an interview that the best time of his life was when he was the army chief. After that his life has been one disturbing episode after another. The one-time strongman has weakened over the years, reduced to nothing more than an anecdote in the annals of political sorcery.

I still insist that the best thing for Ershad would have been retirement from politics after his ouster from power. Since he decided to overstay the welcome, he should have been more forceful and honourable instead of being complicit and scared. He should have worked to prove people wrong instead of giving them more reasons to doubt his convictions.

Part of that failure comes from living in the prison, of his fear of going to prison again. Part of it is because his lust for power never ceased to be obvious. It's poetic justice that people are now treating him no more earnestly than he has treated them.

In the coming days, Ershad will bring us more slapstick moments because deep down inside he is an anguished man. He will fret and fume and swing between his praise and criticism for the government. That's the role he has accepted in the folly of being a make-believe opposition in a make-believe government.

Ershad's meaningless chatter accentuates political void as he, in his provisional position, proves his relentless psychosis. At a time when the ruling party is struggling to rule and the opposition is struggling to oppose, he knows nothing is difficult for someone who doesn't have to do it himself.

Ershad spoke again, and once again in his characteristic ebullience he reminded us of Puer aeternus, Latin for 'eternal boy.' The term is used in mythology to designate a child-god, who is forever young, but depicts in psychology the mental condition of an older man whose emotional life remains at an adolescent level. This man-boy leads a provisional life, because he is afraid of being caught in a situation from which he might not be able to escape. He cherishes independence and freedom, resists boundaries and limits, and hates restrictions.

All of which fits the bill of an evergreen man, whose mind has been aging much slower than his body. Mentally, Ershad lives in 1990, the year in which he was forced to step down in the face of a mass movement. So, when he said last Saturday that the government had no right to stay in power, he couldn't hide his psychosis. He went back twenty-four years and criticised a former chief justice for betraying him.

He was barking up the wrong tree. That chief justice had merely acted out the popular will. It was the people of this country who wanted Ershad gone. It was people who didn't want to see him return to power in the next election. The people also wanted to see him in jail, and they even expected their government to recover the fortune he had allegedly stashed away in foreign banks.

Many years later, the people of this country may have seen enough to change their minds. Over the years they have got their lens adjusted. They know other politicians are as much, if not more, ruthless and mischievous than Ershad. Yet many voters are allergic to him not only due to his autocratic rule before he lost power but also due to his esoteric behaviour since then.

Ershad must be the oldest living politician in this country, who's still actively involved in politics. But he is also the oddest living politician because of his precarious condition. His leadership in the party is wobbling. His standing in the parliament is wanting. His popularity amongst the people is waning.

So, it doesn't take an Einstein to guess that politically Ershad is living in a straightjacket. He isn't probably enjoying his absurd position straddling the contradictions of

being in the government and the opposition at the same instance. Outside the party, he is not the main man in the parliamentary opposition. Inside the party, the wife has stolen some of his thunder. It explains why he occasionally chafes against the government like a pressure cooker intermittently whistles to release steam.

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COMMENTARY | A Retrogressive Policy

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

MAHFUZ ANAM

So, with all these historical experiences around, why is Sheikh Hasina's government going after the free media? The draft of the National Broadcast Policy that has just been approved by the cabinet and gazetted yesterday, does just that.

Why is a new Broadcast Policy such a priority?

If we start from our latest tragedy, thousands of lives have been lost from launch disasters over the years and yet there has been no attempt to frame appropriate policies that ensure proper construction, maintenance and operation of these launches.

People live in fear of buying food sprayed with poisonous preservatives from kitchen markets, and yet no policy to ensure safe food.

Pharmacies are stocked with adulterated medicine and yet no policy to reward good pharmaceutical companies and punish the bad ones. When fake paracetamol medicine killed more than 2,000 kids over a 10-year period our archaic law took 15 years to act and ended with a whimper of punishment that will do nothing to deter its future occurrence.

Our road accidents are the highest in the world but no policy to safeguard the public.

All rivers surrounding Dhaka are so polluted that no marine life now survives. Pollution is now spreading into the countryside, threatening our sweet water fish reserve. Tanneries spewing toxic water into the rivers have gone on for decades. And yet the government either remains unmoved or indulges in eye-wash. No accountability encourages the polluters and land-grabbers.

So when a government that fails to discharge its most basic duty -- that of providing safe food, medicine, water and transport to the citizens -- and focuses on harnessing the media, then what are we supposed to conclude? That the government does not want the truth to be known?

The irony is that throttling the so-called 'bad' news from reaching the public does not serve those who do it -- the decision makers. It only helps the law breakers to continue cheating the public and in effect cheating the government, and in time destroying the latter altogether.

Following are samples of "Provisions" in the gazetted policy, along with our comments.

1. Military, civil and public information that may compromise state security cannot be broadcast.

This provision is self-contradictory and verges on absurdity. If something is already "public information" then why shouldn't the broadcasters use it? Then again how can something in the "civil" domain compromise "state security"? As for military, media usually is very careful and in general never publishes and broadcasts "military secrets."

2. Anything demeaning to the armed forces, law enforcement agencies and government officials who can punish people for criminal offences can't be broadcast.

Imagine the absurdity of this policy. If this policy was already in place then we could not have written about the ten trucks arms haul where NSI and DGFI (according to confessions of accused) officials were directly involved.

We also could not have written about the August 21 attempted assassination of the present PM in which three former IGP, two ex-NSI bosses and three former CID officials and high ranking officials of army and navy were involved and against whom charges have been framed.

According to the policy approved, we cannot broadcast stories regarding death in police custody or torture, abuse of power by military, Rab, DGFI, intelligence agencies and government officials who can "punish." If this policy is enforced then we can never write about cases like the recent 7 murders in Narayanganj where Rab officials were involved, or the recent killing of a garment waste trader who was tortured to death by a Mirpur Thana sub-inspector. We cannot report incidences of cross-fire, torture in remand, etc.

Would Limon -- the innocent school boy who was bullet hit by Rab and who the latter tried for months to stigmatise as a terrorist -- have ever received justice if media did not expose the Rab?

3. Mutiny, chaos, violent incidents ... can't be aired?

"Mutiny" we understand and we may discuss how to cover it. (Here also we would like to argue that in covering the case of the BDR mutiny, our broadcast media did a professional job).

But what is meant by "chaos" and "violent incidents"? According to this policy we cannot cover unrest or show footage of violence. It appears that this policy expects the TV stations to

broadcast song and dance episodes while miscreants uproot railway lines and burn our factories. The extensive footage showing the opposition BNP-Jamaat throwing fire bombs into running buses in pre-election violence was all "wrong" and such coverage would not be allowed in the future?

To us this policy means the government will unleash police violence against dissenters and media will not be allowed to cover it because it depicts "chaos" and "violence." Would coverage of yesterday's police action against Tuba workers be permitted under the present policy?

4. Broadcasting anything that may hamper friendly relations with foreign countries is to be BANNED.

If this law existed then we couldn't have covered Myanmar's sending warships to threaten our Navy that was protecting our maritime boundary back in 2007/8. We couldn't have covered the 'Felany' incident or the regular incidents (now significantly lessened) of border killing by Indian BSF. Is writing about our due share of Teesta Water and criticising India for not responding to be permitted? Or would it be banned in the name of jeopardising our friendly relations?

By the same law, we could not have covered the news of killing, torture, rape, or illegal detention of our expatriate workers in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Malaysia or any of the foreign countries where they work in the name of "friendly relations." So all our expatriate workers, on whose remittance we flaunt the story of 'huge reserve,' are to be left at the mercy and good wishes of host governments and our most timid and sometimes corrupt commercial attaches?

5. No scenes can be shown in advertisements that are not environmentally friendly.

What is wrong with advertisements showing polluted rivers, uncollected garbage, or cutting of trees and urging people to desist from such practices?

6. Misleading and untrue information must be avoided.

About "untrue" information, of course they should be avoided. If by chance unverified information is broadcast then immediate corrective steps are taken along with appropriate apology.

About "misleading" information, can we match what goes on in the name of debate inside the parliament? More often than not, it is the government and not the broadcasters that indulges in half-truths and sometimes outright lies.

The truth is the Broadcast Policy passed by the cabinet has had two mindsets working behind it. One is that of bureaucracy who never feel comfortable with the free media. Now that they have become more partisan than ever and see their future more in sycophancy and less in merit, they prefer a gagged media that will be less prone to doing investigative journalism.

The other mindset is of a political party that, having come to power through a questionable process, sees an enemy in every critical voice. It feels vulnerable to a free spirited media culture and is foolishly moving towards throttling it.

Attitude towards a free media as expressed in the policy is counter to history and the unrelenting march forward of the human spirit that only freedom can fulfill. The PM is totally misjudging and completely undervaluing the contribution that the free media have made in Bangladesh's growth over the last three decades under democracy.

Here, I would like to draw the PM's attention to the writings of Amartya Sen -- whom she likes a lot as evidenced by her repeated invitations to him -- how freedom (including that of the media) assists the process of development. His classic work "Freedom and Development" should be an eye opener to those who have formulated this policy.

We conclude by saying that we are not opposed to a broadcasting policy per se. What we want is a law that nurtures freedom and helps us to grow as a matured industry where maximum public service can be rendered while upholding the highest ethical standards of an ethical and free media.

To get such a law we think -- as does the association of broadcasters ACTO --- that we should first have an independent Broadcasting Commission that should frame a new law with the stakeholders as partners and not as victims.

Form the independent Commission immediately and let it formulate the policy. Government has put the cart before the horse.

We end as we started. Government can throttle the media for the present, but free media will win in the end.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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World silent on new Jewish settlements!

Whether it's CNN, Al-Jazeera, or BBC, no one is talking about Israel's building new illegal settlements. Why isn't anyone telling them to stop robbing Palestinians of their land?

The American president is talking about Israel's rights. It's so painful to see Palestinian children bleeding from their faces. Every negotiation seems to have favoured Israel's demands, not Gaza's. If new illegal settlements were stopped and the Gazans were given the right to operate as a nation, I hope peace would come.

Aminur Rahim
New DOHS, Mohakhali
Dhaka

They're mass killers, deserve harsher penalty

Reading The Daily Star's headline on July 23 (Justice Delayed, not Denied), it struck me that this is not a time of celebration but one of introspection. What has happened to us as a society and as a nation is that we harbour such repulsive creatures in our midst who would stoop to such abysmal depths to adulterate and poison children's medications. In order to satisfy their greed, these pharmaceutical manufacturers wilfully prepared poisonous concoctions, allowing innocent and trusting parents to administer these to their ailing children who only wanted to get better.

It has been reported that 2,700 children died as a result of taking the poisonous medicines. To think that these individuals in the current case got only ten years' imprisonment, for what amounts to mass murder, is astonishing. And to think that many of them got off with a slap on the wrist, or entirely scot-free because they had political connections. What kind of politician will let child-killers off the hook, and for what reason?

However, on a daily basis we also see the sheer lack of concern of business people in adulterating foodstuffs with formalin, bleaches and sundry poisonous chemicals to make fruits riper, and to make foods appear fresher and more attractive. The toll on human life and health is incalculable.

Syed Hamde Ali
The Nawab Palace
Bogra

Comments on news report, "Govt failed to ensure security of citizens," published on August 3, 2014

Zaman Rahman

The 'joker' is back with his dramas! He and his followers are only a laughing stock!

"Israel gets boost from US, UK" (August 3, 2014)

S. M. Iftekhar Ahmed

The US and the UK always claim that they have a moral obligation towards humanity; yet they blindly support a terrorist nation like Israel which continues to kill innocent Palestinians under the pretense of self defense. Why this shameful double standard?

"296 children killed so far" (August 3, 2014)

Dollar Man

Every world leader must come to an agreement to demonstrate their views against Israel. These brutal killings can not continue.

Mayen Uddin Tazim

The whole world has been watching the inhuman killings in Gaza by Israel. What role is being played by the UN?

"BGMEA to pay Tuba workers" (August 4, 2014)

Humayun Hyder

We don't know what is going to happen to the demonstrating workers of Tuba Group as the workers refused the BGMEA proposal to accept two months' salary now and the rest one month's salary plus bonus later. The situation seemed to have taken a wrong turn as many of the workers' health condition is getting worse due to prolonged fasting. I think the government should come forward and take care of the situation in order to save the striking workers.

"The world's paramount terrorist state" (August 2, 2014)

Saif

If only Israel was kept under sanctions, its civilians pounded with bombs, its ports shelled endlessly, its borders sealed, its women and children suffered, then Netanyahu would understand what the Palestinians in Gaza are going through.

Hassle of getting CNG

RIDWAN QUAIUM

THE city's public transport, comprising mainly buses and the 'leguna,' is in dire condition. The buses are unsafe, shabby, overcrowded and difficult if not impossible to access by women, elderly people and people with special needs. Rickshaws are more in supply than autorickshaws but they cannot enter many roads. Taxi is another transport that is available but finding a vacant one is almost impossible, not to mention the sky-rocketing fare.

Hence, despite the struggle that people have to go through to get an autorickshaw, and despite being at the mercy of the drivers in terms of the fare, they have no other option but to depend on them for their daily commuting purposes in the capital.

By law, the CNG autorickshaws are supposed to charge passengers according to the meter and are not allowed to refuse any passengers because of the destination or for any other reason. However, the mismatch in the demand and supply of autorickshaws gives an upper hand to the operators and encourages them to violate the mentioned two laws.

Once in a while, the law enforcement agency conducts a drive against autorickshaws that do not use a meter or refuse to take passengers. During that period passengers get a temporary relief but as soon as the drive ends the nightmares of the passengers return.

Transportation is an important aspect that determines the quality of life in a city and certainly the poor transportation system in Dhaka is one main reason why it is rated as the most unlivable city on the planet. Therefore, the authority needs to consider improving the livability of the city by implementing transportation projects that will serve the demands of majority people in the city, such as the projects outlined in 'The Strategic Transport Plan for Dhaka' rather than the elevated expressway project that has the capability to serve the transport needs of only a few percent of the people.

The writer is a transportation engineer working in Thailand.