

# Hurdles in opening Mongla-Ghashiakhali Route

M. INAMUL HAQUE

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina has asked for closure of all shrimp farms so that the Ghashiakhali channel from the Mongla port could be reopened (bdnews24.com, Dec 15). Her directive had been awaited since the accident occurred on December 9. The 'OT Southern Star 7' sank in the Sela River and spilled 357,664 litres of furnace oil on the waters around the Sundarbans. The Sundarbans, located in the southwestern part of Bangladesh, is the largest single block of tidal halophytic (salt water tolerant) mangrove forest in the world. It lies on the mouth of the Ganges River where it is crisscrossed by hundreds of small and medium tidal creeks. The rivers passing through it are the distributaries of the Ganges, which fall into the Bay of Bengal. The oil spill has caused damage, ranging from Tk. 1,000 crore to Tk. 5,000 crore, to the environment and the economy that depends on the Sundarbans.

The Sundarbans has been subject to aggression since 1980s, while its Indian side was being developed as a wildlife sanctuary and tourist spot. Corruption in the Forest Department and failure of the Tourism Department in Bangladesh allowed such activities to be carried out. By 2000, people were protesting against it under the banner of NGOs for saving wild animals. A few years back we saw an all-out drive by the government, supported by some private parties, to vote for Sundarbans and Cox's Bazar to be included among the seven natural wonders of the world. People from all walks of life eagerly joined the campaign.

Work started in January 2010 for a coal fired power plant in Rampal of Bagerhat District. It is located very near to the Sundarbans. The environmentalists of this country objected to this plant, saying it would damage the Sundarbans through toxic gas emissions; evict people from their agricultural lands and destroy the local ecosystems, but would not give proportionate benefits against the damages that would be done. The environmentalists also demanded measures to stop dumping of oil and other wastes from the ships and vessels plying through the rivers and creeks of the Sundarbans, and from the industries in the districts surrounding the Sundarbans. But the drive to grab as much as land as possible around the Sundarbans had already started by then, with the support of political masters. BIWTA ordered closure of the Mongla Ghashiakhali navigation route in 2011, and diverted the ships to ply through the Sela River of Sundarbans.

The accident should be an eye opener for the responsi-

ble authorities, as to the nature and scale of any disaster. It took six days for the government to react, may be because of strong opposition from the Shipping Minister Mr. Shajahan Khan against closure of the Sela River navigation route (BIWTA is under this ministry). The oil spill had by that time spread over 100 km area, affecting open fisheries, animals, birds and plants (334 species of plants and 269 species of animals live in the Sundarbans). These effects may last for decades.

Now it has become imperative to open the Ghashiakhali route as quickly as possible, but it will not be easy. This 22 km route was formally opened in November 1973. The BIWTA chairman said at the opening ceremony of the dredging of Ghashiakhali Cut in July 2014 that this route was never dredged during last 40 years. He said that after dredging, it will need about Tk. 25 crore annually for the maintenance dredging. But the Google satellite picture shows that ships were plying through the route in 2010, but it silted up by 2013. Why wasn't dredging started before the situation deteriorated? The prime minister



blamed the BNP government for not maintaining the Mongla Port (bdnews24.com). But who closed the route in 2011 to give green signal to the perpetrators to grab lands for shrimp farming along the river? The prime minister has ordered removal of the shrimp farms to reopen the route. Why was a firm engaged at that time to prepare a study report, but not take up the dredging works? Was it a plan in connivance with the BIWTA officials to kill the Ghashiakhali navigation route and grab lands there and around the Sundarbans?

The BIWTA chairman said that a Chinese company was appointed for dredging Ghashiakhali Route to remove 32 lakh cubic meters of silt at the cost of Tk. 88 crore (The Daily Star 13.12.2014). Are they working according to the specifications and maintaining progress as per agreement? If the prime minister of Bangladesh wants to open the route, we believe it will be done despite many other hurdles.

## Botched rescue effort of Jihad

A shocking display of callousness and cruelty

WE are shocked at the sad fate of the four-year old Jihad. And our grief has been further intensified by the callous and insensitive behaviour of the government agencies involved in the rescue effort. Not only was it totally messed up by the Fire Brigade, the handling of the situation, the behaviour and utterances of persons in positions of responsibility, including the state minister for home also confounded the situation.

To say the least, the rescue effort was unplanned and disorganized, with no control over the large number of onlookers; and the deceit resorted to and the hint of conspiracy that the authority 'discovered' in the matter were uncalled for. At the end it took the innovation of a few local people to retrieve Jihad's dead body, which the fire brigade wanted us to believe, after more than eight hours of so called rescue operation, was not there. To have called off the rescue operation shows that the government actually believed that the whole thing was hoax.

And how does the government explain the extremely cruel treatment meted out by the police to a father who was not sure at that time what his son's fate would be? One wonders what his fate would have been had Jihad's body not been recovered. To keep him in custody for 12 hours without food is cruel and betrays a government that is prone to see conspiracy in every event.

There are many explanations that the government owes us and there are many people that need to be taken to task. We would hope that both would be done quickly.

## A good year in agriculture

Bumper crop should lead to fair prices for farmers

IT is reassuring that Bangladesh has passed quite a good year in agriculture through increasing food production coupled with relatively stable prices of rice and vegetables. Boro rice, the principal crop, hit a record high at 1.90cr tonnes while the production forecast shows that the country is likely to harvest 5.6 crore tonnes of paddy and wheat in the outgoing year. This reflects 1.6 percent increase year-on-year. Favourable weather, diversification of farm production, stable price of diesel and fertilizers and government support are some of the contributing factors behind these bumper yields. As a result, food inflation along with overall inflation came down.

Amid this celebration of bumper production, fair price to farmers remains a far cry. Political instability, weak marketing infrastructure, extortions on highways, inadequate storage facilities are the major factors to be blamed. It is quite baffling to know that despite increased production, rice imports continued spiraling fetching low price to farmers.

To maintain buoyancy in production, the government should pay attention to improving the marketing system, bringing new and effective agricultural technologies, ensuring fair prices and giving incentives to growers. As an immediate task, the government should control rice import and reduce diesel prices as the oil prices have fallen in the global market. The private sector should also come forward in establishing cold warehouse and cold chain transport facilities. Above all, political parties should be committed to

## Carnage in Assam

EDITORIAL, THE HINDU

SERIAL attacks by armed militants from the Songbjiit faction of the National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB) have claimed the lives of at least 67 Adivasis (who are still fighting for tribal status), in villages in Sonitpur, Kokrajhar and other districts, in a shocking recrudescence of ethnic violence. Assam, with a history of more than three decades of insurgency, has seen fewer incidents of militant violence overall during 2014 than in any recent year. Two of the major militant groups, the United Liberation Front of Asom led by Arabinda Rajkhowa and the NDFB led by Ranjan Daimary, have come to the negotiating table, though there has been only limited progress in the talks. Meanwhile, the NDFB (S), opposed to the talks, stepped up acts of extortion and abduction. Sustained operations by the security forces against it have led to the killing and arrest of several of its cadres in recent months, principally in the Bodoland Territorial Areas District along the India-Bhutan border. Significantly, the latest attacks came soon after the State's Director General of Police revealed intelligence on expected attacks by the group, and Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi dismissed threats by the NDFB (S) of retaliation against the stepped up operations against it.

The immediate challenge before the authorities is to ensure that the killings do not lead to ethnic clashes on a wide scale that could lead to a larger conflagration. Meanwhile, the best way of stripping the NDFB (S) and any others of its ilk of the facade of the "Sovereign Boroland" cause behind which they seek to mask their criminal intent, will be for the government to address at the earliest the genuine aspirations of the Bodo people in terms of development and entitlements, that would take the people forward from their state of deprivation that stems from historical anomalies and injustices. Efforts to drive a wedge between Bodo and non-Bodo sections need to be countered effectively. Everything should be done to ensure the integration of the different strands of the population. Also, the talks being held with two organisations should be pursued with a sense of seriousness if only to demonstrate the fact that it pays to talk. Alongside such an approach, employing tactics that combine physical sweeps with the help of security forces and an effective intelligence network on the ground, the state should root out the menace of faux terror indulged in by the NDFB (S) cadres who are estimated to number less than 300 and who strike in hit-and-run mode in areas that are remote, forested and inaccessible. In this battle, the Centre should deploy and commit its security forces to aid the State — rather than indulge in any sort of a blame game.

## Lessons from Peshawar

PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN



PRAFUL BIDWAI

IT'S humanly impossible not to be revolted by the barbaric killing of 134 children in Peshawar by Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). This galvanised unprecedented solidarity in South Asia and even impelled Narendra Modi to talk to Nawaz Sharif, offering help.

However, India seems to be slipping back into the old hostile mould. It protested against the bail for Zaki-ur Rehman Lakhvi, the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) "mastermind" of the 2008 Mumbai attacks. Second, National Security Adviser Ajit Doval demanded that post-Peshawar measures against TTP be extended to LeT. Third, India refused to grant visas to Pakistani delegates to a Pakistan-India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy (PIPFPD) seminar.

Lakhvi was granted bail by a court. The Pakistan government said it would appeal against the order and further detained Lakhvi. A similar legal process prevails in India, under which scores of people charged with or convicted of serious offences are granted bail.

They include Bharatiya Janata Party leaders Amit Shah and Maya Kodnani, and policemen named in Ishrat Jahan and Sohrabuddin's "encounter" killings. The remedy against bad bail orders is legal appeal, not political condemnation.

LeT is a nasty terrorist group, whose head Hafiz Saeed absurdly blamed India for the Peshawar attack. But TTP actually owned responsibility for it.

The two cannot be equated at this juncture, as Doval did. Denial of visas for the PIPFPD seminar was deplorable. PIPFPD has promoted fruitful cross-border citizen-to-citizen dialogue over 20 years.

India's actions are a retrogression to Modi's pre-Peshawar policy. Foreign secretary-level talks were called off in August because Pakistan High Commissioner Abdul Basit didn't cancel his meeting with Hurriyat leaders. India suddenly took offence at what has long been a routine.

In October, Modi chided Pakistan as "the enemy" which has been taught a "befitting lesson" through border firing. In December, concerts by the highly-acclaimed Sachal Jazz Ensemble were cancelled. So were performances by Pakistani qawwals at the Delhi Press Club -- under official pressure. A delegation of Pakistani MPs visited Delhi, but didn't get to meet the Lok Sabha Speaker.

What of the recent ceasefire violations? The Modi government deludes itself that it can prevent these through a military response which can threaten Pakistan with unaffordable costs. The strategic balance simply doesn't permit such deterrence.

Both sides routinely violate the 2003 ceasefire agreement -- Pakistan probably more frequently, to "internationalise" Kashmir. They stoop to beheading each other's soldiers.

Therefore, all solutions to India-Pakistan problems must be peaceful. These do work, despite hiccups -- like the

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Indus Waters Accord (1960). By contrast, when left to military leaders, problems (e.g. Siachen or Sir Creek) become intractable.

The Peshawar shock could hopefully become a turning point in Pakistan's policy towards terrorism, which permits jihadis to collude with the army and secret agencies and attack not just India, but also Pakistan's Shias, Ahmadis and Christians.

Pakistan's policymakers have learnt no lessons from these attacks, or from the fact that Osama bin Laden could find refuge in Pakistan. They continue to shield jihad groups. The government hasn't sought an extension of the detention of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi chief Malik Ishaq, involved in anti-Shia pogroms (since detained under a different law).

Peshawar stands out because its victims were primarily children of army personnel, and the attack came amidst of a strong anti-TTP military campaign. This might strengthen the army's will to fight the Taliban.

Islamabad has, for the first time, repudiated the distinction between "good" and "bad" Taliban. Army chief Raheel Sharif visited Kabul to demand the extradition of TTP's Mullah Fazlullah. The government has hanged some convicts. But a militarist, "kill-them-all," response won't do.

There must be a resolute, systematic campaign to break the nexus between Pakistan's state and the extremists' jehadi apparatus. This campaign must be based on understanding extremism's root-causes, and should radically transform public discourse.

This means acknowledging that the Taliban aren't "outsiders" or "misguided" people -- anyone than the Hindutva goons who terrorise non-Hindus and want to rid India of them. Both are equally fanatical and dangerous.

Like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the Taliban has a clear agenda -- an Islamist Pakistan that practises Sharia law, without pluralism or tolerance. This must be opposed without ifs and buts.

India can contribute positively to de-Talibanisation if it resumes the bilateral dialogue with Pakistan. India must actively engage with liberal and tolerant voices in Pakistan's civil society, which uncompromisingly oppose Islamism and want a modern, tolerant, pluralist and democratic state.

This entails rejecting the cynical advice that India should directly talk to the Pakistan military, just as the US does. India's government is civilian and must deal exclusively with Pakistan's civilian leadership -- and strengthen its peace constituency.

Peshawar has created a unique moment in Pakistan, when de-Talibanisation can be put on the agenda. India can make this a unique moment for peace in all of South Asia by earnestly proposing cooperation -- in fighting terrorism, promoting trade, and stabilising Afghanistan.

If the Modi government is not to squander this valuable opportunity, it must stop regarding Pakistan as an enemy, but see it as a potentially friendly neighbour. Above all, it must crack the whip on Hindutva extremists.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

LETTERS  
 TO THE EDITOR  
 letters@thedailystar.net

## An unparalleled act of kindness

A report was published in a local English daily on 16th December portraying a US cop with a heart of gold! The white cop's generosity to a poor black lady was unparalleled. It showed the other side of the coin, in contrast to the oft-repeated news of US white policemen shooting and killing black youngsters.

The news is about a white cop William Stacy who came to know about the days of starvation of Helen Johnson's (a black woman) family that led her to steal five eggs. Instead of arresting her, he bought her a dozen eggs! Later, he and his colleagues have brought a truckload of food to the Johnson family so that they can have enough food during the Christmas season. This is a shining example of humanity indeed.

Engr. S. A. Mansoor  
 Dhaka

## Sony hacking

This refers to the report, "Sony releases Kim comedy online" (Dec. 25). It is good that Sony has decided to release the movie. However, the hacking of this Japanese company's website by North Korean hackers, as alleged in the media reports, is a serious issue. Was Sony not prepared or was its cyber defense weak? How to avoid such future attacks? All these issues need to be considered and preventive steps should be taken. Japanese businesses need to fortify their cyber defenses. We should not forget that Japan has space technology.

Deendayal M. Lulla  
 One-mail

## Getting Indian visa online

We have come to know that India has introduced online visa for Australia, United States and a few other countries. Their citizens will no longer need to visit the Indian Embassy/High Commission to apply for a visa. There is a visa fee and service charge of US \$60 to be paid through Debit/Credit card. Excellent arrangements. We sincerely request the Indian High Commission in Bangladesh to introduce online visa system for Bangladeshis as well, where visa application submission and payment of fees can be done online. This should be done as soon as possible so that the senior citizens of Bangladesh can get Indian visa online without any hassle.

Jamshaid Taher  
 Banani, Dhaka

## Comments on news report, "DEATH for small town's big devil," published on December 24, 2014

A. H. Dewan  
 Qaisar deserves more than death.

M. Emad

1971 Madhampur/Brahmanbaria Razakar commander Syed Mohammad Qaisar has got what he deserved.

## "Qaisar, why?" (Dec. 24, 2014)

Nationalist

This criminal should definitely be hanged till death.

New Generation

It is unfortunate as well as shameful that we had failed to bring these war criminals to book in all these years.

M. Emad

All 1971 war criminals should be hanged.

## "Stop gold smuggling" (Dec. 23, 2014)

OpeeMonir

I do not think the parliamentary committee really understands this. Or they understand it well, but only downplaying it for the sake of politics. Basically, these smuggled gold reaches Indian market quickly, but a huge chunk of it is used as payment for the illegal activities. It cannot be stopped; we'd better change our laws to make it a legal trade so that we can make it easy to control.

Javed Helali

The gold becomes Bangladeshi property when it is taken control of from the smugglers. Do you mean it does not get stored in the Bangladesh Bank? Is it re-smuggled to India or sent there by courier by our government? By the way, how many dollars worth of gold has been seized this year? Any figures/numbers? What quantity remains in Bangladeshi hands?