

BIWTA boss behind alleged river grabbing Who will watch the watchman?

THE report in this newspaper appearing yesterday that the Chairman of the Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) has among other acts of indiscretion leased out parts of several rivers does not surprise us at all. Such malpractices in public organisations have become the norm rather than exception. He has denied the allegations, and even if we were to give him the benefit of doubt, should he as the boss not been aware that illegal lease of river land has been made by someone in his organisation?

Corruption and financial irregularities in public organisations, in most cases, are not possible without the acquiescence if not active participation of the higher management. In this particular case, foreshores and banks of two important rivers around the capital, on which it survives, have been leased out to private parties violating the orders of the High Court.

The list of the BIWTA chairman's alleged irregularities is long. And what surprises us is that the matter has come to light only after an insider chose to reveal the malpractice of the boss. It only betrays the abject lack of oversight of the ministry and the other agencies of the government whose job it is to see that such things did not happen, and bring immediately to book anyone who indulges in dishonest practice.

Among Nature's endowments the most endangered in our country are the rivers which are being plundered indiscriminately in all manner of ways. And when those that are entrusted to protect rivers are involved in their destruction then nothing but the severest punishment will do.

Eviction of Buddhist families Stop culture of violence and intimidation

AT least 52 Buddhist families are living in fear and uncertainty following eviction from their homestead in Naikkhangchhari upazila of Bandarban. The victims were forced to leave their homes in Uttar Ghumdam Barua Para on Sunday after they were beaten up and their houses vandalised, allegedly at the behest of members of the ruling party. According to the locals, a Buddhist temple was also vandalised.

We are appalled that the families were evicted without proper rehabilitation, and that too, in a most inhumane, uncivilised and coercive manner. Although a court had given permission to evict 25 families to set up a rubber plantation, the locals claim that they had not been notified by the upazila administration. Rather, they were threatened by land grabbers and vested quarters in the area, and finally evicted when two ruling party members allegedly brought in over 100 Rohingya people to force the villagers to leave.

The locals also claim that the administration was complicit in the attack, as they had been "bought off" by the ruling men. These are serious allegations that must be investigated and perpetrators of violence brought to justice, irrespective of their party affiliation or administrative clout.

The eviction of indigenous and Buddhist communities in Naikkhangchhari upazila in Bandarban to satisfy commercial appetite of land grabbers has become common practice, and usually the same process of intimidation and violence is followed. We urge the government to stop this systematic eviction through violent and unlawful means.

Additionally, if communities are to be relocated, they have to be notified and recompensed adequately.

Why are people getting scared of democracy?

ABDUL MATIN

THERE was a joke in Baghdad soon after the fall of Saddam Hussein. One Iraqi civilian once asked a US marine patrolling the streets of Baghdad, "Why are you here?" The marine replied, "To bring democracy to your country." The Iraqi civilian got scared and said: "Please do whatever you like, but don't bring democracy to our country!" According to a survey by the Lancet, an estimated 654,965 people were killed in the war in Iraq. What is worse, Iraqis are being killed or maimed almost daily in large numbers even now due to sectarian violence. This explains why the Iraqis got so scared of democracy imposed by the States.

Parliamentary democracy was restored in Bangladesh in 1991. We have been experimenting with it since then, with both the government and the opposition often resorting to excessive force. The government always struggles to preserve democracy and the opposition fights to restore democracy. While the party activists get entangled in street battles, the people are caught in the crossfire, resulting in injuries and deaths. Public and private properties are destroyed in the process.

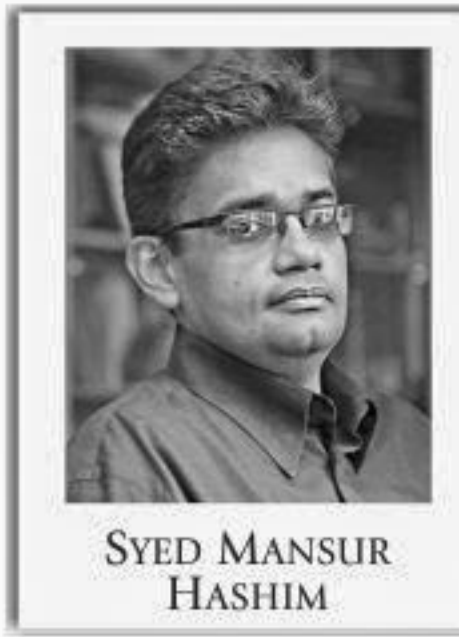
The people are now confined to their homes due to blockades and *hartals*. They cannot move freely and safely anywhere in the country. They cannot send their children to school or get medical treatment. For want of transportation, the farmers are unable to sell their seasonal vegetables which are rotting in the field. The traders are unable to market their products. All of them are counting huge losses. Due to supply constraints, prices of essential goods have been rising steadily, causing hardships to the people.

Democracy was defined by Abraham Lincoln as the "government of the people, by the people and for the people." Now, the people of Bangladesh are being held as hostages by those who claim to be the custodians of democracy. Like the Iraqis, we too are now getting scared of a new brand of democracy being forced on us. There is, however, one difference. The conflict in Iraq was initiated by an invading force. In Bangladesh, we did it ourselves. What a shame!

Democracy failed in Iraq since it was imposed through the barrel of the gun. Similarly, it is unlikely to flourish in Bangladesh if we force it through *hartals*, blockades, arson, violence or coercion. Democracy can never be forced upon the people. It always evolves through their participation. How can the people participate if they are held as hostages or not allowed to express their will freely in a fair election? Without their involvement, democracy will be redefined as the "government of the leaders, by the leaders and for the leaders." Is this what our leaders want?

The writer is a senior nuclear engineer.

Farewell to FDI?



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

THE Phulbari "controversy" has been going on for eight years now. The environmentalists' groups have always been opposed to open-pit mining and the site remains a focal point of resistance. The incident that occurred in November, 2014 has brought the issue to limelight once again and it becomes necessary to get

certain facts straight. Incidentally, a responsible official of the Ministry of Energy around the same time issued a statement (erroneously) that there exists no contract between the government and Asia Energy Corporation (AEC) for mining at the site in question. Getting back to the subject at hand, the blockade by locals at Dinajpur and the subsequent vandalism that occurred on AEC site has sent entirely the wrong sort of signal to prospective foreign investors.

That a number of protesters can attack the offices of a foreign company in the presence of law enforcers and vandalise vehicles and smash property while the local



administration representative is present is ludicrous. Although the situation was brought under control later, the damage to the country's image as a safe place to do business in has been significant. Although some overenthusiastic ministerial official may state that no contract exists, the facts point to something else entirely.

According to *Energy & Power* report 'Records Need making Straight': "BHP submitted exploration report to the government and informed its decision to withdraw from Bangladesh. At the same time, within the scope of the contract (clause 11) and Mines and Minerals Rules (clause 12, 13), the government approved the application for transferring existing contract and Licensing to Asia Energy (Bangladesh) Pty Ltd. In this regard, prior vetting was taken from Law Ministry. License was transferred to Asia Energy on 11 February, 1998 during the 1996-2001 term of Bangladesh Awami-League led government. The Foreign Minister of Australia was present during the signing of the agreement."

Subsequently, AEC obtained 'mining lease' in April 2004 and environmental clearance in September 2005. From this point on it gets interesting. The company submitted its feasibility study to the government in October 2005 to start operations for an "open cut mine having a production capacity of 15million tonnes of coal per annum." Nearly a decade has elapsed, governments have come and gone, and yet no government has either accepted or rejected that study. Now what sort of message does that give out to the international exploration companies? Can Bangladesh be expected to be taken seriously? With the agreement remaining valid since the government has not rejected it, is it any wonder that we have failed to make headway with foreign companies to explore new energy sources?

It is obvious that according to available documentation, the AEC has fulfilled all contractual obligations. Rather it is the government which is dilly-dallying with the question of extracting coal from Phulbari. The question at this juncture is precisely how long can the government afford to keep this matter hanging? It is not for the first time a ministry official has said that the government did not sign the lease agreement with AEC. Also, we may recall that the previous BNP government's energy adviser stated to the press that the government has a Contract with AEC but it is an 'anti-state' contract. Should the terms of a contract signed between the State and AEC prove unpalatable for whatever reason, then would it not make sense to rescind the contract? Why isn't this being done? Has it anything to do with damages that may have to be paid out to the company? What about the damage to the reputation of the country, or is that not a problem for the elected government in power?

With regards to the incident at Phulbari on November 26 and the mayhem that followed, consider the following. If AEC is operating legally in Bangladesh, the company CEO has the legitimate right to visit his office and conduct his company activities. Even if AEC project's status is not known by the local officials, should they allow a group of self-proclaimed 'national committee' activists to enter into the office of the foreign company and allow them to vandalise its property and physically assault company officials? What action has the local administration taken against those

who at regular interval organise such vandalism? Or, are we then to assume that it is a conscious attempt by officials to demonstrate that AEC's presence is unwanted in the country? In that case, is it not logical for the government to take legal measures instead of encouraging vandalism? What message then are policymakers giving out to potential investors about treating a legitimate company (and FDI initiative) intending to work in Bangladesh?

All this is ironic to say the least since only last week the state minister for energy stated that we have no way but to extract local coal to meet national energy demand. And that we are fast running out of time to take a decision on coal as gas reserves are depleting at an alarming rate. Would the government care to explain precisely what progress it has made so far to secure primary energy supply? Also, the attitude and style of handling of the matter by the government officials clearly sends wrong signals to the foreign investment community. It is not political unrest and uncertainty alone that cause the negative impacts on investment.

The writer is Assistant Editor, *The Daily Star*.

Modi's chauvinism problem



SHASHI THAROOR SERIES

SHASHI THAROOR

AS the New Year dawns, it has become increasingly clear that India's new government faces a dilemma entirely of its own making -- one that its predecessor never had to confront.

Narendra Modi's election as prime minister in May 2014 was initially hailed worldwide as marking the advent of a more business-friendly government in the world's largest democracy. Encouraged by Modi's pro-market sound bites -- he vowed to "replace red tape with a red carpet," declared that the government has "no business" in business, and campaigned on the slogan "Make in India" -- investors rushed to praise him as a new messiah of development.

Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) gained the first absolute majority in the lower house of parliament in a quarter-century, thereby freeing it from the pressures and constraints of coalition governance. Modi's trips abroad brought talk of new business opportunities, a wave of foreign investment, and joint ventures. He vowed to improve India's ranking in the World Bank's global "Doing Business" report, from a dismal 142nd place to at least 50th.

Such talk continues, but it seems increasingly removed from the BJP's central preoccupations. In fact, Modi rose to

Modi has found himself in an unenviable position vis-à-vis his own supporters: He cannot live with them, and he cannot live without them. Unless he can find a way to resolve his political dilemma, hope for a "Modi miracle" in India's economy will ebb as rapidly as it rose.

power at the head of a family of right-wing organisations that largely do not share his economic priorities, and that are obsessed with so-called "cultural nationalism" -- which is essentially just repackaged Hindu chauvinism.

The tension between Modi's avowed economic reformism and the cultural nativism that animates his government's electoral base is a major impediment to progress. After all, the political majority that Modi needs to pursue his economic policies depends on the organisational capacity of the very people whose chauvinism is undermining him.

In fact, Modi's rise was followed almost immediately by a series of attacks on India's minorities, particularly Muslims. A legislator from Shiv Sena, a far-right regional party allied with the BJP, forced a Muslim cafeteria employee to eat bread during the Ramadan fast. A more tragic fate befell a young Muslim tech worker in Pune, who was beaten to death in "retaliation" for a defamatory social-media post with which he had no connection.

Then came a nationwide scare about "love jihad" -- an alleged Muslim ploy to make India a Muslim-majority country by seducing Hindu girls into romantic entanglements that would lead to their conversion to Islam. No

sooner had this BJP-fueled hysteria been widely dismissed -- Muslims comprise 13% of India's population, and there have been only a handful of such marriages -- than the inflammatory rhetoric mounted.

A prominent Modi supporter declared that all Indians had to acknowledge that they were culturally Hindu. A member of the Council of Ministers divided the country into *Ramzada* (believers in the Hindu god Ram) and *Haramzada* (bastards) -- and was allowed to retain her post. Another BJP legislator declared Mahatma Gandhi's Hindu-nationalist assassin to be a patriot, while a fringe party in the Modi camp announced a campaign to install the assassin's busts throughout the country.

The galloping chauvinism has known no bounds. Modi himself made the embarrassing declaration -- in a speech at a new hospital, no less -- that the figure of the Hindu god Ganes, with its elephant's head on a human body, attested to the ancient Hindus' knowledge of plastic surgery.

The education ministry abruptly withdrew German as an optional third language in government schools, and replaced it with Sanskrit. And the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a volunteer organisation modeled on the fascist groups of the 1920s -- complete with khaki shorts and staves -- declared a campaign of *Ghar wapasi* ("return home"), or reconversion of minorities to the Hinduism from which their ancestors had allegedly lapsed in the distant past.

The resulting controversies have convulsed the country and dominated political discourse, sidelining Modi's economic policies in the process. Indeed, protests by opposition parties have paralysed the parliament, making it impossible for the government to introduce -- let alone pass -- important elements of pending economic-reform legislation, such as a law raising the limit on foreign-owned stakes in the insurance sector to 49%.

Yet Modi has said nothing to quiet his supporters or mollify his critics, raising concerns among investors -- especially foreigners -- about his ability to manage his own constituents. For example, Lorenz Reibling, of the German-American firm Taurus Investment Holdings, had a few questions -- beginning with the implications of recent anti-Christian and Muslim tirades and conversion propositions -- before committing to a major investment in India.

As Reibling put it: "Conversion and ethnic/religious cleansing doesn't ring well here in Germany particularly. The bizarre dream of a 100% Hindu India would be an India with little or no foreign support. That is not what India deserves." If Christians, in particular, are exposed to an "inquisition in reverse," he observed, they would scale back investment considerably. Similarly, Reibling added, Middle Eastern investors would respond to an anti-Muslim policy by cutting India out of their portfolios.

Reibling is far from the only investor to harbour these fears; indeed, he was merely expressing what his fellow investors abroad have been discussing among themselves. The alarm bells have already rung.

Modi has found himself in an unenviable position vis-à-vis his own supporters: He cannot live with them, and he cannot live without them. Unless he can find a way to resolve his political dilemma, hope for a "Modi miracle" in India's economy will ebb as rapidly as it rose.

The writer, a former UN under-secretary general, is a member of India's Parliament for the Congress party and Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs.
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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Name the flyover as "Ekatturer Shaheed Smriti Uralshetu"

As a son of martyred journalist Selina Parveen, I, on behalf of the children of 1971 martyrs, request the Hon'ble Prime Minister to name the under construction flyover at the Mouchak-Malibagh point as "Ekatturer Shaheed Smriti Uralshetu", in memory of the martyrs of 1971 Liberation War.

Four roads named after freedom fighters would run under the flyover once it's completed. They are Shaheed Tajuddin Ahmed Sarak (from Mohakhali to Moghbazar intersection), Shaheed Captain Mansur Ali Sarak (from Moghbazar intersection to Kakrail intersection), Shaheed Shangbadik Selina Parveen Sarak (from Moghbazar to Mouchak intersection), Shaheed Faruk-Taslim Sarak (from Mouchak to Rampura Bridge) and freedom fighter and MP Rashed Khan Menon Sarak (from Moghbazar intersection to Bangla Motor intersection).

My concern is that, once the flyover opens, people may not remember the names of the roads named after the four martyrs of 1971. I have also found out that the name for the flyover has not been fixed yet. Under the circumstances, we request the PM to name the flyover as "Ekatturer Shaheed Smriti Uralshetu" to honour the martyrs and freedom fighters and remind people of their sacrifices and valour.

Md Shumon Zahid
Son of martyred intellectual Selina Parveen
Executive Member of Projanmo '71 (Martyrs' children of '71)

Using satellites to track airplanes

This refers to the report, "I would be 'alone at sea'" (Jan. 7). It is a very heart-rending report. Celebrating one's birthday on a cruise liner's deck is a dream-come-true. But the victim's fate had other plans.

It is high time that civilian flights are tracked on real-time basis using satellites. The London-based International Maritime Organisation (IMO) tracks ships around the world using satellites. Then why cannot the global organisations like the International Air Transport Association (IATA) and the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) do the same? Disappearance of aircraft like an Airbus or a Boeing is really puzzling. It should be made mandatory for airlines to track airplanes using satellites as is done by the IMO. The black box flight recorder technology is dated and has its limitations, when the plane crash occurs in a sea or an ocean. These flight recorders have become obsolete in these days of satellite technology. Latest technology available with the US Navy allows a black box to self-eject and transmit its position. Searching a black box in a vast ocean or sea is like searching for a needle in a haystack.

Deendayal M. Lulla
On e-mail

Lift wanted at Uttara's regional passport office

I had been to the regional passport office at Uttara recently. God, who on earth had chosen that five storied building as a regional passport office where there is no lift? People of all ages who go there to obtain their passports have to climb up the stairs. I was shocked when I saw an elderly person of 75 or 80 years gasping when he reached the 3rd floor of the building. He had to climb up two more flights of stairs to reach the 5th floor. Out of compassion I asked the gentleman his name and it was Siddiqur Rahman. He was a retired joint secretary. Accompanying him was his wife who could make it to the 5th floor on her own and had to sit on the chair provided to her seeing her fatigue. I requested the Ansar on duty to hold the elderly lady take and her to the 5th floor.

I urge the government to place a lift there or kindly shift the office to a building which is congenial for persons of all ages.

Tayab-Ul-Huq
Uttara, Dhaka

Comments on news report, "HRW slams govt for gagging opposition, media," published on January 9, 2015

Akm Fazlul Bari

It is better to be in office rather than going to the streets and kill people, burn buses, cars and public properties.

"Continued operation against BNP" (Jan. 7, 2015)

New Generation

The way the ruling party leaders are trying to misguide the people, we're afraid about the fate of democracy in our country.

"Rab under new leadership" (Jan. 9, 2015)

Salim Ullah

Now it's to be seen how Benazir Ahmed, the new DG of Rab handles this organisation.

"Hasina and Khaleda needn't be eyeball-to-eyeball" (Jan. 9, 2015)

Javed Helali

One solution (wishful thinking) is that both the ladies quit politics together on the same day, time and place. There are some good people in both parties who can take over.