

“Water treaties aren't legally binding; what binds them is goodwill”

Shafiqul Islam, Director of Water Diplomacy, Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering and Professor of Water Diplomacy at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, speaks to Nahela Nowshin of The Daily Star.

The Daily Star (TDS): Please tell us a bit about the importance of water diplomacy in the context of Bangladesh.

Shafiqul Islam (SI): At the World Economic Forum in Switzerland, they put water at the top of the international agenda, meaning water is becoming a global security threat from multiple perspectives. There are competing demands of water for humans, agriculture, ecosystems, industries, urban development, etc. Given that the amount of water is fixed and the number of usage is increasing, conflict is inevitable.

Although Bangladesh is considered a flood-prone country, over 80% of the rain in a year is seen during 100 days and 100 hours, primarily in July, August and September. The other nine months are fairly dry. Let's take the Ganges, for instance. Most of the Ganges flow through Bangladesh occurs during the rainy season when you don't really need the water. On the other hand, you have very limited flow during dry season when you actually need it. So we have to deal with this kind of asymmetry in water availability.

Water is a renewable resource that can be used multiple times for multiple usages. For example, water for household use today can be used tomorrow to grow rice. The whole premise of water diplomacy is to use flexibility in water use and allocation to create options that currently don't exist.

TDS: Would you say there's a lack of regional cooperation on such issues?
SI: Let's focus on the word cooperation for a

minute. China has decided to share rainfall and stream flow data with Bangladesh. So how will it help? The data being shared is of an area almost 2500 km upstream. When it rains in China it takes about 20 days for it to reach Bangladesh. The sharing of data is surely a sign of cooperation but it won't address the problem of limited water supply in the dry season.

We face a water crisis during the dry season but the data is going to be shared during the rainy season. When we talk about cooperation, we need to think about what that entails. We need to figure out under what situations we're going to cooperate and how; that's where the conversation is not happening. We need to first define what the problem is, for instance, is the problem flood, drought or use of water for irrigation? These are all different problems that need to be tackled differently.

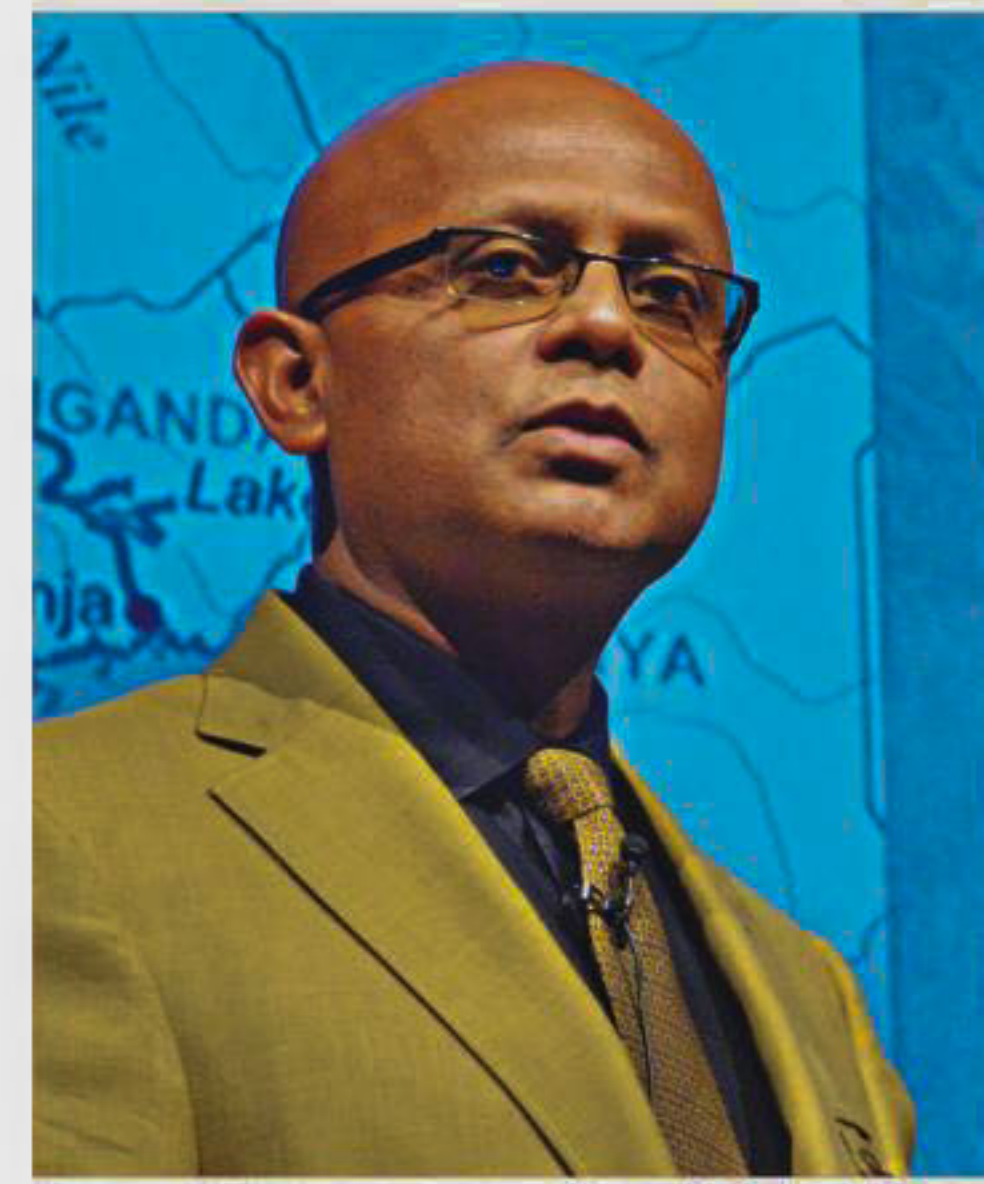
For any water problem, we need to ask: Who decides? Water for whom? How are we going to achieve it? For example, if we want to provide water to everyone in the Korail slum, the problem isn't that WASA doesn't have water. The problem may be illegal settlement. WASA may consider that by providing water to the slum they'll be legally acknowledging the settlers in an illegal land. That's a much more problematic situation than availability of water. We need to diagnose the nature of the problem before we can understand where the bottleneck is to design and implement effective intervention.

TDS: In light of PM Modi's upcoming visit to Bangladesh, where do you think the focus of bilateral talks should lie in terms of water sharing (if addressed at all)?

SI: India-Bangladesh talks need not be focused on just one river, whether it's the Teesta, Brahmaputra or Ganges. Conversations about connecting different issues for different rivers need to happen simultaneously -- for example, one can think of utilising the flow of the Teesta and the Ganges together as a creative option. If India builds a dam on Teesta, does Bangladesh have a corresponding benefit? If not, can we use the flow in the Ganges to get similar benefits? Can Bangladesh get more of the Ganges flow during the dry season? That's how we must think. If we focus on the Teesta only, we'll be stuck. We have to try to link benefits so that we have mutual gains.

India's hydropower development projects aren't taking up water; it's non-consumptive use. If they had used the same water for irrigation then we'd have a problem but if the problem is only hydropower-related, then there are easier solutions. We need to come up with creative options depending on which river we're talking about and how benefits from multiple rivers can be co-shared for mutual gains.

Complexity of issues as well as competing and often conflicting values and priorities for water allocation make the process of charting a path for the future difficult. Who benefits? Who bears the burden? At what scale? At



Shafiqul Islam

what price? These difficulties are amplified by practical questions like, how can we reconcile the water needs of India for development with the need for adequate water supply and to minimise salinity intrusion during the dry season for Bangladesh? How can increasing future demand for water meet the previous agreements for the Ganges? How can a new agreement for Teesta relate to larger regional concerns beyond water, or the needs of other GBM basin countries? How does uncertainty related to climate change, demographic shifts,

and consumption habits affect annual and long-term operation and management of water in the GBM basin?

These are a small subset of many questions that need to be raised and discussed. More importantly, these questions are contingent upon the context, framing, and choice of the problem's scale. Consequently, there are no pre-specified solutions to these complex problems. As the Water Diplomacy Framework -- developed by academics and practitioners from around the world led by faculty from Tufts University, MIT and Harvard University -- argues, complex problems cannot be solved but can be resolved through a negotiated mutual gains approach. Hopefully, the visit of PM Modi will open the door to initiate such a conversation between Bangladesh and India.

TDS: How can the rights of a lower riparian country like Bangladesh be ensured?

SI: These rights look good on paper but it's hard to implement them in reality. Water treaties aren't legally binding; what binds them is goodwill. Despite there being wars between India and Pakistan since the Indus Treaty was signed between the two countries in 1960, the treaty is still respected. A trust has to be developed over time.

If Bangladesh and India sign a treaty on the Teesta, a neutral third party could oversee that the treaty is followed through. Since these treaties aren't enforceable, we have to develop a mutually beneficial mechanism so that they become nearly self-enforcing.

ASSASSINATION OF PRESIDENT ZIAUR RAHMAN

Questions never answered

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

RECALLING a nightmare is never a pleasant experience, yet every year this time my mind is thrown back to the eerie morning of May 30, 1981 at the Chittagong Circuit House. That morning a sitting President was assassinated, part of a century old building was shattered, and three other innocent persons were slain—all in an armed attack by men in uniform from the local Garrison.

When I arrived at the scene of the murderous attack with other officials at the crack of dawn, it was weirdly quiet for a place that apparently seemed to have been a battleground hours before. Part of the porch of the Circuit House and a portion of the upper balcony lay in pieces, two uniformed bodies - one a police man and the other an army soldier - lay still in the staircase. The third body, the Security Officer of the President, lay on the upper floor. But the most devastating and harrowing image that I would carry for years (and even now) was the bullet-ridden body of President Ziaur Rahman lying in the corridor, only a few feet away from the suite he was occupying in the upper floor. It was incredible that the most powerful man of the country at that time, at whose call the whole army would once respond, lay on the floor apparently cut down by one of his own people.

The whole operation to kill Ziaur Rahman probably lasted about an hour. I say this because it was around three in the morning when I heard the first blast from my bungalow (the Circuit House was only a mile away), and I was informed by Police Control only an hour later that the President had been assassinated. The attackers had left an hour before I arrived at the Circuit House. It was a neat and well-organised operation with a single motive. But what transpired later was more incongruous and more inscrutable.

The President had a small delegation travelling with him, all of whom had stayed the night at the Circuit House. This included besides the President's own personal staff, Dr. Badruddoza, the President of BNP, and Dr. Amina Rahman, Advisor, and a state minister. They were in their respective rooms reportedly hiding under the bed when the intruders attacked. One by one they came out of their rooms when we reached the Circuit House, all shaken and distraught. The person who showed the greatest calm and was in fact dressed impeccably in his military uniform was Lt.Col. Mahfuz, the President's Personal Secretary. He was on his radio phone as he came out to see us, and he calmly informed us that the Home



Minister and the Chief of Army (Gen. Ershad) were on their way in a helicopter. The equanimity with which he spoke gave no indication to me that he considered the event to be a catastrophe. It appeared from his behaviour that everything was under control and the killing was the handiwork of some stray assassins.

But Ziaur Rahman's death at the hand of people that he commanded was no accident. Neither was it an impulsive act of a group of disgruntled officers. His assassination had been an act in the making for several years. Unfortunately for the country and millions of non-partisan people like us, the event would be played up and used by the real architects adroitly in subsequent days instead of finding the truth and the real conspirators.

The first noticeable thing, apart from the enigmatic behaviour of Lt. Col. Mahfuz, was the absence of any military presence in the perimeter of the Circuit House. He claimed that he had spoken to the Army Chief and the

Home Minister. Yet for a full three hours after the incident, no announcement was made by anyone over the radio or other means. We took the initiative to inform the Ministry of Home Affairs but only in the early hours. The phone lines outside Chittagong went dead thereafter and stayed dead for the next 48 hours. No helicopter came and no one arrived from Dhaka.

The first announcement of President Zia's death came from an anonymous army officer over Chittagong Radio who claimed that a coup had taken place and the government of Ziaur Rahman has been replaced by a "Revolutionary Council". There would be no rebuttal of this from the Government until about six hours later when the Vice President gave his speech over the radio and denounced the so-called coup attempt and put the leadership of the rebellion on Maj. General Manzur, GOC of Chittagong.

On the other hand, a dozen soldiers occupied the

telephone transmission centre while another group secured the TV and radio stations. Not a single soldier paraded the city nor any attempt was made by the "rebellious army" to stop traffic. Yet, we had a city seized by panic.

The behaviour of Maj. Gen. Manzur, the supposed leader of the rebellion and mastermind of the assassination, was imponderable. When he called me (the then Deputy Commissioner) and the Divisional Commissioner to his cantonment office for a meeting, he presented himself to us as a "spokesman" of the so-called Revolutionary Council. His reply, to my query as to who comprised the Revolutionary Council, was evasive. What was most curious was that he spoke as though he was reading from a script (lambasting the government and calling for non-cooperation with Dhaka until the Government gave in to the Revolutionary Council's demands). For a normally cool and composed person, he spoke like a man possessed. Yet, the same Manzur spoke in a very different, and almost mellow tone when he addressed officials, journalists, and a cross section of people at the Chittagong Court Building a day later. Who was calling the shots for Manzur?

The same day (May 31), Maj. Gen. Manzur would huddle with his officers at the East Bengal Regimental Center and carry an endless series of conversations with his interlocutors in Dhaka. We do not know till this day who the main interlocutors were, although it is believed that it was mainly the late Lt. General Shawkat who was on the other side. But my sources did confirm that the officers present in that meeting included those who would later be tied to Zia's assassination and those who would testify against them. For me the irony was that when we were summoned to meet with Maj. Gen. Manzur, there were more than a hundred officers who had gathered there earlier to meet him. There was no telling who was supporting whom from that bundle.

Sadly the court martial that would be held some three weeks later and the in-camera trial that would lead to hangings of some thirteen officers did not benefit from the evidence of one man who was termed as the leader of the rebellion. He was silenced well before the prosecution and trial of the accused. We will never know the real story and the brain behind the assassination. The truth will forever be shrouded in mystery.

The writer was Deputy Commissioner of Chittagong from 1978-81. He is the author of the book *Assassination of Ziaur Rahman and the Aftermath* (UPL, 2009).

QUOTABLE Quote

SHILPACHARYA ZAINUL ABEDIN
1914 - 1976

WHAT GIVES ME EVEN MORE JOY THAN CREATING MY OWN ARTWORKS IS SEEING ART BEING NURTURED IN SOCIETY. ART SHOULD BE TURNED INTO AN ALL-PERVASIVE, DAILY PRACTICE.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- Banquet
- White's TV colleague
- Dominant
- Entertain
- Censor's sound
- Dark and gloomy
- Reckless
- Highlands girl
- Tick off
- Good pair
- Motel freebie
- Thing-amajig
- Winter quaff
- Stage comment
- Justice Scalia
- Take in
- A question of time
- Saddler's tools
- Composed
- Octavia's husband
- Media icon from Chicago
- Salon jobs
- Writer Cather
- Ocean arm
- Rental choice
- He may have a hand full of clubs

DOWN

- Beatles descriptor
- Pipe bend
- Kevin Costner film
- Bundle of papers
- Lights-out tune
- Rick's pianist
- Charms
- Chris Pratt film
- Invites
- Florida feature
- Derisive cry
- Layered mineral
- Clackable picture
- Scott of "Hawaii Five-O"
- Decline
- Fan's favorite
- Some bills
- "Hubba hubba!"
- Roadhouse
- Concert venue
- Meadow group
- Andy's son
- Big-scale movie
- Solo in space
- Dr.'s field
- Hog home

Yesterday's answer

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BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

ARE YOU COUNTING THE DAYS TILL YOU GET OUT OF THE ARMY, BEETLE? I WAS UNTIL I RAN OUT OF SPACE!

GREG & MORT WALKER

HENRY by Don Trachte