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Minister's bland statement on extra-judicial killings

Action not words are needed

THE Information Minister's response to the US 2015 Country report that cites, among other things, the rise in extrajudicial killings and the failure of authorities to maintain effective control over security forces, is perfunctory, to say the least. To declare that the government neither supports nor allows extrajudicial killings is to say nothing at all. It goes without saying that a democratic government can never allow such violation of human rights under any circumstances. Such occurrences are a travesty of justice and can only be regarded as crimes that must be punished and prevented altogether.

But the fact remains that despite the minister's ambivalent reaction, extrajudicial killings have occurred. There have been, as the Report cites, cases of forced disappearances, arbitrary arrests and detentions and torture carried out by security forces. According to Ain O Shalish Kendra, the number of extrajudicial killings and deaths in custody in 2014 was 128 and in 2015 the number shot up to 192. Such horrifying statistics show that law enforcers, who are supposed to be a disciplined force in charge of protecting citizens, have been abusing their authority and committing these crimes with impunity. The Minister has stated that the government has always investigated cases of extrajudicial killings and taken punitive action against those found guilty. We would like to know what these actions are.

Just insisting that the government does not support extrajudicial killings and other human rights abuses by security forces is not enough. Unless the state takes active steps to make sure such killings do not take place in the first place, we will merely be going around in circles and justice will be further away in sight.

Corruption in the CMCH morgue

Bring the criminals to book

VISITING the morgue for the autopsy report of a loved one is traumatic as it is, extorting the relatives of the dead for such services is just savagely cruel. We are appalled to find that in the Chittagong Medical College Hospital (CMCH) such practices have become the norm, and that the loved ones of the dead have to pay a hefty bribe to get a postmortem examination report, which is supposed to be free. Even worse is that this ghastly business has been going on for months under the very nose of the authorities concerned. A group of hustlers, reportedly in connivance with some corrupt hospital staff, are running this syndicate.

These criminals have grown so audacious in their acts that they, at times, refuse to properly stitch the dead body unless the right amount of bribe is handed over. It is also disturbing to note that the touts at the centre of this shoddy affair have never been brought to book and are allowed to enter a sensitive area like the morgue whenever they want to.

The problem of dual administration of the morgue premises by Chittagong Medical College (CMC) and CMCH needs to be resolved for the proper functioning of the institution. A probe into the irregularities surrounding the autopsy process is the order of the day. The touts and their patrons in the morgue have to be tried. Also, it is high time to bring the entire area under the observation of closed circuit TV camera so that such appalling incidents of corruption are not repeated.

COMMENTS

"Faulty cylinders run risk of blast"

(April 16, 2016)

Abul Hashem Mia

People are being injured or worse killed due to these faulty vehicles. There are many unauthorised conversion centres that fit vehicles with counterfeit cylinders, even those vehicles that are not designed to contain CNG. Stop risking people's lives for profit. Please!

Make the budget work



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

THE Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) has recently made recommendations on the upcoming budget in the unveiling of 'State of Bangladesh Economy in 2015-16'. In what was

termed as 'qualitative changes' to make the budget 'realistic', the leading think-tank representatives outlined a number of areas that had undermined public confidence in the annual budgets that are approved in parliament every year. One of the key issues that plague every budget is its inflated size, which is invariably larger than the preceding one. The over-enthusiasm of some planners is what may be termed by some analysts as unrealistic goals, which are then trimmed down in successive revisions, as there is a failure to implement the annual development plan (ADP) for a variety of reasons, of which failure to generate requisite revenue is one.

As taxation remains the principal source of revenue for the government, it has been recommended that the income tax regime be revisited. We understand from the CPD presentation that our income tax collection has hit a 14-year low. That means there are loopholes in the system and tax evasion is a serious problem in the country. Recently Bangladesh was flagged by the Asia Pacific Group on Money Laundering

(APG) in a draft assessment report that put Bangladesh as a country that is 'risky', unless constructive steps were taken to tackle money laundering. That some US\$55.88 billion had been siphoned off from the country over the last decade shows that we have a serious problem with illicit flight of funds. Is it really any wonder that so little tax is being paid? Besides this, it makes sense

and is hardly a satisfactory state of affairs.

That the government has been unable to stop the flow of scams in the financial sector is public knowledge. Despite high profile committees and their recommendations, successive state-owned banks continue to experience pilferage. The constant pumping in of public funds to the tune of thousands of

country. We have witnessed the war of words between the ministry of finance and BPC recently about how much money is owed by the latter to the government. That problem was sorted out later on, but why would such massive pressure have to be brought on any State-owned entity to admit that they were in the green if the books of account were in fact public



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to widen the taxation bracket so that the spread is widened and genuine tax payers are not overburdened.

There appears to be some contention over provisional growth of the economy and the actual growth. Stress has been put on the formation of a statistical commission that would assess macroeconomic indicators and make available to policymakers as to which way the economy is going. Getting back to revenue generation, that we have serious shortfall in generating requisite revenue is a reality. The CPD presentation shows that there is a tendency to overinflate revenue figures in the budget. And as budgetary allocations to the various ministries and departments are based on projected revenue collection, it is only natural that these individual budgets are cut later on to match realities on the ground. This is a practice that has been going on for years (under successive governments)

crores of Takas to keep such unhealthy financial institutions in business, whilst apparently failing to plug holes in the system that allow for pilferage to take place in the first place, demands a change in the manner we do business. It would make sense to place the detailed financial accounts of state-owned entities in the public domain, because it is not simply the government-controlled banks that suffer from ambiguity, the same can be said of practically all corporations and state-owned assets including the utility companies and other entities and organisations that fall under the public sector.

Such transparency would go a long way to prevent graft and bring about some form of accountability, which sadly till date, has been largely missing. For instance, we have no idea about the books of accounts of the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC), the entity that ensures the import of fuels to the

knowledge? Indeed going by what has been reported in the press, an investigation carried out by the national board of revenue (NBR) found a number of state-owned enterprises had failed to pay value added taxes. Again this matter was resolved after much wrangling.

At the end of the day, we are confronted with the various problems associated with revenue collection. And hence, it is hoped that when policymakers sit down to balance the budget, realistic revenue collection should be taken into account before declaring a budget that in all likelihood will have to be trimmed later on. This makes the most important policy document in the country (and its formulation) the butt of jokes, which we are sure, does not sit well with either the government or the people.

The writer is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

Can Dhaka respond to a devastating earthquake?

SHAMIMUL ISLAM

THE tremor that has recently jolted Dhaka is just another reminder of the devastation that might be awaiting city-dwellers in case of a major earthquake! Bangladesh already experienced wreckage of the kind that might follow an earthquake when Rana Plaza collapsed in Savar in 2013. Although Rana Plaza was a single construction failure and not a result of an earthquake, it illustrated how ill-equipped we were as a nation to tackle and respond to disasters, and gave us a rough idea of the chaos and mismanagement that might ensue in case of a major earthquake. The Nepal earthquake last year also showed the nature and extent of devastation caused by earthquakes. Dhaka has been identified as one of the 20 most vulnerable cities in the world by Stanford University researchers for its unplanned urbanisation and lack of access to services. Under the circumstances, isn't it time to review the strength and weakness of Dhaka's preparedness to respond to earthquake devastation?

As one of the most densely populated areas in the world, Dhaka has massive traffic and narrow streets and roads, and is least prepared to respond to emergencies. Even under normal circumstances, it is impossible for emergency vehicles such as ambulances

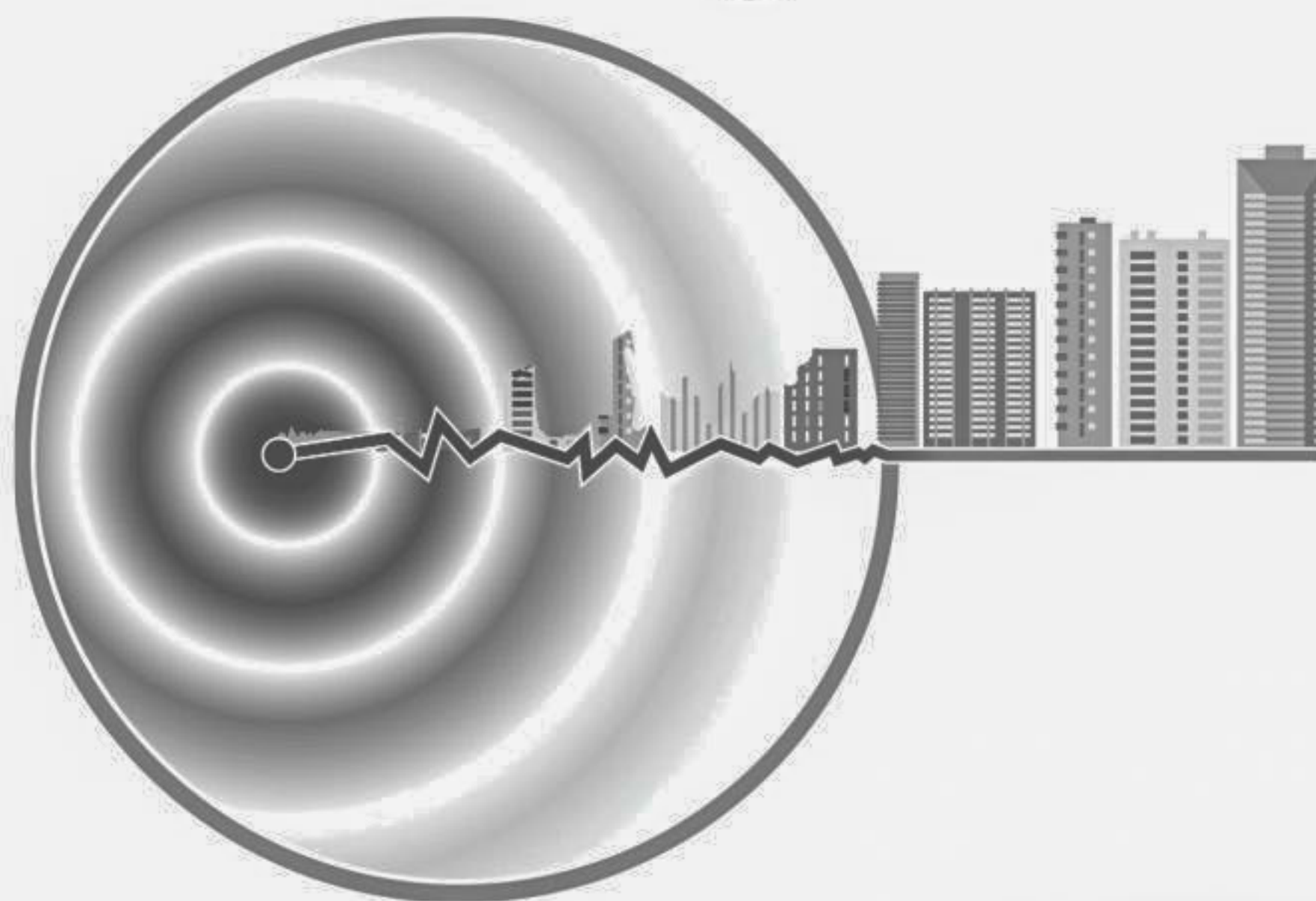


PHOTO: EXPERTBEACON

to manoeuvre through the heavy traffic of Dhaka; if this city does not have a way out for small emergency vehicles, how, we wonder, will it respond to something as terrifying as a severe earthquake?

It is the high time to ask, do our cities have any sort of plan and enough resources to retaliate in an emergency situation? Do they possess enough human resources and logistical support? Do they have enough funds to carry out drills simulating a disaster-like situation? How many cranes and bulldozers does

Dhaka city possess to provide immediate support in case of an earthquake? These are the questions that we should ask the government and the authorities concerned, and they, in turn, should realise that this issue merits urgent attention and deserves more allocation of resources.

Bangladesh has made progress in disaster-management in terms of floods and cyclones in coastal areas as a result of foreign aid and sustained government efforts; however, in terms of disasters like

earthquake and building fires, Bangladesh has made very little progress. The National Disaster Management Bureau has been working to develop city dwellers' awareness for potential earthquake hazards. However, Bimal Kanti Paul, Professor of Geography at Kansas State University, in his recent research found that 83 percent of Dhaka city dwellers don't know what safety measures to take during an earthquake. The World Bank and some other agencies have, in recent years, put emphasis on training firefighters, civil defense and volunteers, but the number of such trained personnel is insignificant, when we consider the population of Dhaka. Consider the fact that in a city of 15 million, Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil defense has only 9,000 members! It is all too obvious that despite the fact that Dhaka is exposed to a serious level of vulnerability, it simply does not have the capacity to carry out rescue operations of the magnitude of an earthquake.

Given the frequency of earthquakes in Bangladesh in recent times and the severity of those in other countries at this time, we must take immediate steps to mobilise our resources. The government, for starters, can allocate the required funds for such disaster preparedness.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Protect St. Martin's

Every year, a number of people visit St. Martin's Island. Most of the time, this influx of visitors is in excess of the capacity of the island, which leaves a negative effect on its environment. In addition, most tourists are ignorant of the effects of pollution that they cause, and throw plastic bottles, polythene, leftover foods, coconut husk etc, all over the island. Kitchen waste and sewage from the hotels,

and fuel seepage from the vessels also increase pollution in the island. Besides, the large number of unplanned infrastructure is destroying the biodiversity and beauty of the area. A definite action plan and proper management are needed to preserve the environment of St. Martin's Island.
Md. Arifur Rahman
Environment Counselor, BEPZA

Ensure safety measures at shrines

Last week's temple fire in Kerala, India (that left over a 100 dead and nearly 400 injured) is shocking and should be a wakeup call for everyone. It is not uncommon to see public gatherings in large numbers at temples and shrines. So it is the responsibility of the authorities to ensure proper safety measures in these places. Both the common people and the authorities should keep alert of these types of incidents. For example, to contain the

fire, transportation of fire fighters and firefighting equipment is very important. For this purpose, there should be wide roads linking such establishments to the main roads. Also, blueprints of the building structure should be given to the fire brigade so that they can prevent the blaze from spreading to the other parts of the building and the adjacent area.
P. Senthil Saravana Durai
Maharashtra, India



PHOTO: AFP