

The Daily Star

FOUNDER/EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA THURSDAY SEPTEMBER 8, 2016, BHADRA 24, 1423 BS

Dhaka losing its water bodies

Lack of proper scheme to blame

WATER is the lifeline for any city. Dhaka is no exception. The land needed to retain water in ponds in three principal areas of the city, i.e. Dholaikhal, Kaliyanpur and Goran Chatbari are sadly inadequate. Experts estimate that in Dholaikhal and Kalyanpur areas, 105 and 514 acres of ponds are required and the land available there is 3.5 and 171 acres respectively. Retention of water is essential for a number of reasons. Without these water bodies, there is no place for storm water to go, preventing downstream erosion and basically improving the water quality in an adjacent river, stream, lake or bay becomes impossible. In a city of 16 million residents who experience heavy downpour every year, water logging remains a major hazard because drainage systems cannot pump out excess water to retention areas due to lack of retention areas.

We did not arrive at this situation in a day. Successive city corporations have come and gone and little heed was paid to acquiring lands that would be reserved for water bodies such as ponds. Yes, Dhaka has grown at an unprecedented rate and city planners have failed to address the problems associated with unplanned urbanisation and not only was new land not acquired, existing water bodies such as lakes and ponds were allowed to be encroached upon to make way for housing and industrial plots.

Today, WASA is unable to meet the water demand of a major portion of the city and the water that is pumped into homes is often not fit for human consumption. Unless we are willing to go tough against land-grabbers to protect what little retention areas we have and actively reclaim the lost canals the capital may face a severe water crunch as well as inundation.

Stunting in children

Strong efforts needed to overcome the problem

DESPITE remarkable strides in overcoming poverty, the country still faces major challenges in elevating nutrition levels among children. Around 7.3 million children under five, according to the findings of a joint survey conducted by BRAC and Leveraging Agriculture for Nutrition in South Asia, remain stunted. Moreover, 6.5 million children are underweight and 2.9 million are physically weak.

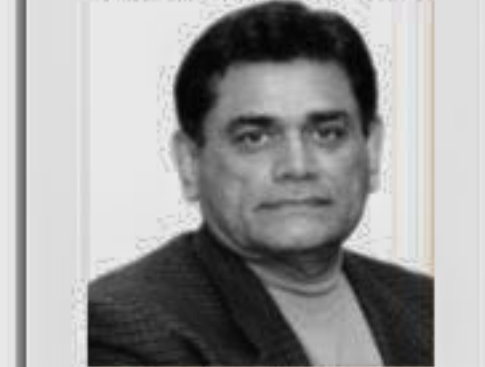
Stunted growth in children has many public health impacts. It can increase risks of illness and premature deaths. It may result in delayed mental development, affecting a child's learning ability and also lead to reduced cognitive capacity.

Given these concerns and that stunting can be intergenerational, our inability to significantly reduce stunting among children is disappointing. That is because we have not truly ensured that women, young women especially, have the necessary nutrition available to them to give birth to strong children. Child marriage has also been a drawback in keeping stunting in check, as women who are married off at a young age, are naturally not physically ready to give birth. Food adulteration too is a factor, denying children the necessary nutrients and resulting in delayed development.

Such conditions, however, cannot be allowed to persist. In the interest of creating a brighter future, its designers must be made strong in health and in mind now. Awareness to the needs of women's nutrition must be increased. The government should strongly clamp down on food adulteration and ensure proper nutrition for children throughout the country. With strong efforts, we believe the country can overcome the problem of stunting in children as it has many other challenges.

Politics with Jamaat

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



BRIG GEN
SHAHEDDUL ANAM KHAN
NDC, PSC (RETD)

LIKE language politics cannot be taught – it has to be learnt. And one thing that one must learn in politics, as much as in war, is that a weak front should not be invested in and vulnerabilities plugged. The BNP, it seems, has committed both the cardinal mistakes of standing by a discredited ally and exposing its vulnerability. Consequently it is being made to dance with the opponent's tune. Jamaat is BNP's Achilles heel and a weak link. Regrettably, it seems, it has invested hopelessly in a dilapidated party, and with it one dares say, it may well have staked its political future too.

For any political observer, BNP's fascination with Jamaat remains an enigma, and one is sure that many in the BNP, both the rank and file and the top leadership, are equally puzzled at the sheer bovinity with which the party leadership seek to continue its association with a political party which, in its present form, has lost all moral, ethical and legal grounds to represent any section of the people of this country. It is difficult to understand what obligation BNP feels towards the Jamaat whose bond has become a shackle and, as I have said many times before, Jamaat is like the old man who has got his legs wrapped around the neck of Sindbad like a python. And it will not be wrong to suggest that if the Jamaat is surviving at all, it is because of the oxygen that its link with the BNP has been providing it,

particularly after its top leadership were removed from the scene, being charged and punished by the International Crimes Tribunal for their crimes against humanity in 1971.

It has been the strategy of parties like Jamaat to seek legitimacy by aligning with a mainstream political party or creating conditions that compelled the ruling party to seek some sort of understanding with it if not an alliance,

who sought legitimacy by exploiting the religious sentiments of the majority people, thus making the mistake of causing Jamaat to appear as the flag bearer of Islam in Bangladesh, which clearly it never was or will be. But the contribution of the military autocrats in rehabilitating Jamaat is but one part of the story. The animosity of the two major parties had also helped it to make itself relevant in Bangladesh politics. In

judiciary preferring its verdict over government's decree on the grounds that, firstly, banning it would force the party to go underground and, secondly, while the government decree can always be reversed by another government, verdict of the highest court of the land will not be. One is not so sure. There are instances of High Court verdict being reversed by another verdict subsequently on appeal. And for all that one can say, there are Jamaat elements that are in a subterranean state in cohorts with the proscribed Islamist groups. And not all those who voted for Jamaat in 2008 would choose to go underground. Platform politics is the only way to gain people's support

Reportedly, some younger elements of Jamaat are not too worried about the ban since they feel that the party could emerge with a new name, which would help remove the stigma from it. That may not be as easy as they think. Changing name may be easy but will that hide its identity or its political philosophy?

Contrary to what some Jamaat sympathisers in other countries think of Jamaat's political credential in the country, the party over the years has been gradually losing its support base. Number of votes obtained by the party has been decreasing from 12.1 percent in 1991 to 4.6 percent in 2008. As for now, Jamaat exists with BNP's support and to some extent due the inertia in the legal front. There is no progress in amending the ICT Act that would allow the ICT to try the political party, and the Jamaat's appeal against a High Court ruling to cancel its registration remains pending in the Supreme Court.

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



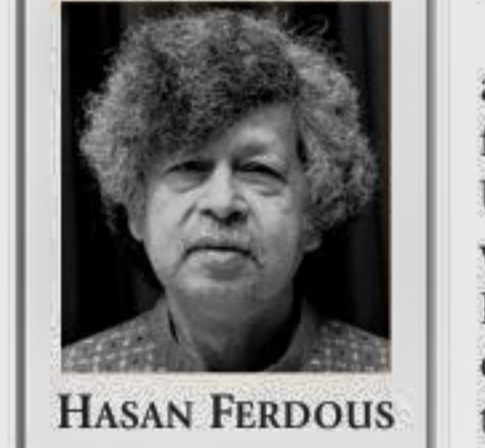
more so when the political system is devoid of popular support. A classic example of this is the role of Muslim Brotherhood, (fuelled by the same ideology as Jamaat) in Egypt. The Brotherhood had, at a point in time, created conditions that had forced Nasser to seek an understanding with the party, though that did not work out at the end. In Bangladesh, Jamaat was rehabilitated by the autocratic forces

this regard one has to ruefully acknowledge that the idea of caretaker system was mooted initially by Jamaat which the AL pursued in its company.

Some say that banning of Jamaat is a matter of time. In fact a minister is on record saying that Jamaat would face the ban by 2016 although he holds neither the home nor the law portfolio. However, the government has left the issues at the hands of the country's

United Nations and the "i" word

HIGH NOTES LOW NOTES



HASAN FERDOUS

SHASHI Tharoor, my former boss at the United Nations, was - and perhaps still is - a fiery defender of the United Nations. He was once asked by a BBC interviewer how did the UN feel about the "i" word, i for irrelevant? Mr.

Tharoor, without missing a heartbeat, replied, "Oh, I think the 'i' word for us is actually 'indispensable'."

That was about 15 years ago. Today, I wonder how does he feels about the dreaded "i" word, and yes, I mean "i" for irrelevant. For a starter, I would mention three recent events.

Last month, the United Nations envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, walked out of an international humanitarian task force meeting in Geneva within minutes after it had opened. All major parties involved in the conflict were present, including the Russians and Americans, and their proxy fighters, the Assad regime and the "moderate" rebels fighting the government. After spending months and weeks talking to all sides on the need for a humanitarian pause so that urgently needed food aid could reach the people of the besieged towns of Madaya, Zabadani, Foah and Kafraya, the parties were still nowhere near an agreement. It made "no sense" to continue talking just for the sake of talking, he said, and walked out of the meeting.

The same day, August 18, an Associated Press photographer captured the image of a boy rescued from the rubble of Aleppo. The city had suffered constant bombing from all sides, trapping nearly half a million people in death throes. The latest bombing, by all indications, was by the Russians, a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. The boy - his name we later learned is Omran Daqneesh - was placed on an orange chair, his face and hair dusty and bloodied, his eyes dazed. He was completely silent, not even a teardrop in his eyes. Within hours, the photo went viral, making him the new poster boy of humanity's collective failure to stand by the neediest.

As it happens, the UN has been begging the warring parties and their patrons for a 48-hour humanitarian pause, but the UN's big honchos, the five permanent members of the Security Council, on whose shoulders the world placed the heavy burden of maintaining international peace and security, just could not agree on how to proceed. On August 22, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Stephen O'Brien, met face to face with the "gang of five" and looked straight into their eyes.

"I'm not going to pretend - I'm angry, very angry," he said referring to the carnage in Syria for the last five years. "This callous carnage that is Syria has long since moved from the cynical to the sinful," he said. Looking bleary and sounding hoarse, the UN Under-secretary-General begged, "So please: now is the moment, this instant, to put differences aside, come together as one, and stop this humanitarian shame upon us all, once and for all."

There was pin drop silence in the Council chamber, long faces of the world's powerful cast downward. Meanwhile, thousands of miles away in Aleppo and other cities in Syria, bombs continued to drop.

So why is it that the UN cannot do anything about the slow strangulation of an entire nation? As a former UN staff member, I am quite familiar with the stock answer. "This is the responsibility of member states.

The world should hold them accountable."

There is logic to this answer. Sure, the UN is the sum total of its member states, but how can we not recognise that their failure to carry out their solemn commitment to "peace and international security" is actually the failure of the United Nations? When the organisation's key members fail to perform their duties year after year, the relevance of the organisation itself comes into question. There is no two-ways about it.

Time and again, the UN has found itself on the wrong side of history. Nearly 50 years ago, in 1971, Bangladesh faced a similar annihilation at the hands of an occupying army. For nine months, the Security Council failed to meet - not even once - due to disagreements among its key members. Finally, when Bangladesh - with the help of the Indian army - was on the verge of winning its freedom, the Security Council woke up from its slumber to stop Bangladesh's march to freedom. The big honchos spent several futile days and nights, negotiating a ceasefire. Neither Bangladesh nor India heeded to their maneuverings, and thirteen days later, on December 16, Bangladesh was finally free. Five days later, the Security Council

had not come to grips with the real problem of Bangladesh, and instead had dealt only with peripheral humanitarian problems, the Secretary-General stammered to acknowledge that the entire episode was "a very terrible blot on the page of human history."

That was not the last time the UN was left watching people die. The Bangladesh genocide was followed by similar carnages in Cambodia, the Balkans and Rwanda. Unable to get its "gang of five" to agree on political action, the UN has increasingly turned its attention to humanitarian and emergency assistance. Useful work no doubt, but that only makes the UN an expanded - and more glorified - International Red Cross. Since the Red Cross does not have to deal with political prima donnas, it could be more effective, only if it could be equipped with more resources. Why, it could even replace a hobbled United Nations!

As for the question whether the UN is "irrelevant" or "indispensable", go ask young Omran and hundreds of thousands of Syrians like him. I have no doubt what the answer would be.

The writer is a journalist and author based in New York.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Congratulations to U-16 women's team



PHOTO: STAR

We want to express our heartfelt congratulations to the U-16 women's team for their outstanding performances in the AFC Under-16 Women's Championship Qualifiers. These young girls have set a glorious example in the country's football history. Special thanks go to the coach who worked so hard for the last few years for this achievement.

Raton J Murmu
Banani, Dhaka

Making profit at the cost of depositors

Although banks have brought down the interest rates on deposit to 5-7 percent, the rates on lending remains as before or even higher. This means the banks are making more profit than before at the expense of the depositors. With inflation at around 6 percent, the depositors are getting nothing. The government should look into this matter.

Luthfe Ali
On e-mail



Five-year-old Omran Daqneesh

PHOTO: AP

managed to adopt a resolution calling for a durable ceasefire. By then, of course, all guns had fallen silent. The resulting laughter could be heard even in charred villages in Bangladesh, thousands of miles away.

Then Secretary-General U Thant memorably captured his own frustrations in getting the big league boys to act on a humanitarian crisis. In his memoirs, *View from the UN*, he wrote: "Throughout the struggle, the United Nations had made no move to act; my pleas and warnings to the Security Council, both privately and publicly, fell on deaf ears. The Council was immobilised, both by the refusal of the parties directly involved (India and Pakistan) and by the major powers, to face up to their obligations under the Charter to confront the issues forthrightly."

Throughout 1971, the UN's principal preoccupation was to encourage Bangladeshi refugees to return home, although there was no guarantee of their security. When in June, a correspondent asked U Thant why the UN

As it happens, the UN has been begging the warring parties and their patrons for a 48-hour humanitarian pause, but the UN's big honchos, the five permanent members of the Security Council, on whose shoulders the world placed the heavy burden of maintaining international peace and security, just could not agree on how to proceed.