

Beaten, heads shaven and garlanded with shoes!

Perpetrators must be punished

There are no words to express our outrage and anguish upon reading the report in this paper about the medieval treatment meted out to a poor couple of an ethnic minority by village arbitrators in Mymensingh. Villagers decided to take the law into their own hands and inflict the most humiliating punishment on this couple. The husband and wife were dragged out of their house, brutally beaten, their heads were shaved and they were paraded around the village with garlands of shoes around their necks. They were also fined a huge sum, failing which, they were threatened with eviction from the village.

Firstly, who gave them the authority to be the moral police of the village, to pass a verdict and then carry out the most disgusting form of punishment? There is no legal justification for such arbitration. Secondly, what were the local authorities, the police, doing when all this was happening? The comment by a local representative that the perpetrators did not inform them (the local representatives) and hence they had no idea of the incident, is ludicrous. The self-appointed arbitrators tortured the hapless couple in front of all the villagers. Were all the public officials and law enforcers in deep slumber while the illegal act was being perpetrated publicly?

We demand that the group involved in this despicable crime be immediately arrested, put on trial and meted out exemplary punishment under the law of the land. It is the responsibility of the law enforcers, local government officials and the villagers to protect members of the community and ensure that their rights are not violated in this way.

Acute gas crisis in Savar

Bring to book the corrupt coterie

Gas shortage in Savar has turned acute as gas pressure remains very low during most of the time of the day. It is disrupting everyday life of the residential gas users. High prevalence of illegal gas connection in the area is responsible for such sufferings of the common people. Reportedly, there are around 7 lakh illegal gas connections in the area while the number of registered users is only 50,000. Such widespread corruption is seriously depriving the legal users of adequate gas and the government of huge revenue.

Allegedly, different syndicates in connection with corrupt officials of Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company have set up illegal distribution lines at 800 to 900 points of the main supply line. They are making a huge fortune out of this illegal business. The problem exacerbates as allegedly the local ruling party members as well as some government officials are involved in this business. In some cases, they provided gas connection even after Titas had severed the illegal lines. As a result, the drive for snapping illegal gas lines has little effect in curbing the malpractice.

The enormity of the problem clearly shows that the Titas Gas authorities have an inadequate monitoring system in place to check these illegal activities. Besides operating drives against illegal users they should also launch clean-up operations against the unscrupulous elements of the gas company. The local administration should also join hands to nab the intruders irrespective of their political affiliations.

NO FRILLS



SYED MANSUR
HASHIM

CONTAMINATED drinking water is a major cause of deaths globally. Last week, the World Health Organisation (WHO) unveiled the report "UN Water Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking Water (GLAAS) 2017" which charts out the water and sanitation situation in 75 countries, and the news is not good. There are "2.4 billion people living without access to improved sanitation facilities, and nearly 700 million people not receiving their drinking-water from improved water sources." It is obvious that governments around the world are not spending enough to meet water and sanitation needs, and Bangladesh is no exception. Our government spends about USD 5 per capita on water and sanitation per year. And thanks to the sorry state of overpopulated cities, where municipal corporations are in no condition to supply safe drinking water to such huge numbers of people living in extremely congested areas, the casualty rate among children (under 5) dying due to diarrhoea has reached 45,000 per year.

We did not get here in a day. Over the last three decades, the capital city Dhaka has been a magnet for migration from rural areas. It is not simply a question of better employment opportunities, but has to do with land ownership patterns and the side effects of climate-induced changes that have wreaked havoc on traditional means of employment in rural areas. There was a time when this migration constituted workers destined primarily for the readymade garments industry, but we have witnessed the birth of new industries and different sectors over these few decades. We have also seen the rise of the non-manufacturing service sector. The net result of these changes is that major urban centres like Dhaka now boast mega-city population of more than 16 million people.

Human waste or faeces are going into the water supply, and this is putting people at risk of contracting cholera, dysentery, typhoid and polio. These are issues that policymakers must ponder upon when making national budgets and allocating resources for water and sanitation (WASH). Although the government budget for WASH has increased from USD 308 million to USD 548 million over FY2013 to FY2015, we have a very long way to go. The Department of Public Health Engineering, and Water Supply and Sewerage Authority of Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna and Rajshahi are responsible for "water supply and sanitation facilities throughout the country. These five institutions alone reported a combined budget increase from Tk 20.2 to 30.3 billion (USD 259 million to USD 389 million) from 2013 to 2015." What comes through in the report is that despite countries like Bangladesh increasing WASH budgets, these measures are not having the desired impact. The fact is that there exists such a tremendous gap in financing to achieve the water supply, sanitation and

hygiene targets set forth in SDG 6 that the capital investment needed will be at least three times the current investment levels.

While this is an average estimate, Bangladesh will have to take the WASH budget to well above the USD 1 billion mark from the current USD 500 million, and there lies a major hurdle: where is the money going to be found? As with other countries, the government has its own resources and external financing for the WASH budget, and according to the 2015 data, 23 percent of this came from external sources. "Globally, over USD 11 billion in ODA grants and loans (USD 7.4 billion), non-concessional loans/credits (USD 3.4 billion), and other funds (over USD 300 million) from high income countries (bilateral aid, multilateral development banks, NGOs, and private foundations) was disbursed (i.e. spent) on water and sanitation in 2015." Bangladesh featured ninth in the top recipients of

These are some of the problems we face. At the end of the day, as policymakers struggle to meet the ever-increasing demand for water, we can implement existing laws that make it very expensive for polluters to indiscriminately destroy existing water systems (both rural and urban).

The sheer greed of interest groups like real estate conglomerates to industry and individuals - all backed up by political clout - has literally transformed the geographical landscape of the country, where major sources of fresh water have been contaminated and continue to be contaminated and filled up. We are talking about major rivers that feed the capital city (Buriganga, Sitalakhya, Turagh, etc.), canals that once crisscrossed Dhaka, natural swamps and other water bodies - all these have suffered either encroachment or contamination thanks to the dumping of untreated industrial effluents or given way to housing estates. In



PHOTO: STAR

development assistance for water and sanitation (greater than USD 100 million in disbursements in 2015), grants versus loans; and the majority of it came in the form of loans.

Despite finance from external sources and domestic mobilisation of resources, the challenge for policymakers remains on how to strike a balance between new investment (because the bulk of the budget come from domestic resources) to provide service to the "unserved" and recurring expenditure to sustain existing investments. Those challenges amplify as the coverage and quality of services increase, i.e. the increased costs for "staffing, electricity, parts, and supplies to operate and ensure the long-term viability of the existing systems and assets." The operational financing gap is usually covered through government subsidies. Cost recovery remains a major headache for countries like Bangladesh, where user tariffs are insufficient.

the absence of strong and effective regulatory bodies that were supposed to protect us from such illegal activity, we are now facing serious public health hazards (as pointed out in the UN report) like losing 45,000 children under the age of five to diarrhoea.

There is also need for rationalising what it costs to get water to end users and what we, as consumers, are paying for that water, because lessening of government subsidy is needed so that those funds may go into improving the infrastructure to get more water to more people. These are undoubtedly tough decisions for any government to make, especially in the run-up to the general elections in 2019, but to do nothing is putting off a potential time bomb (in terms of health hazards) for millions of citizens, especially children who are most vulnerable to preventable diseases like diarrhoea.

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Reinventing the Commonwealth



SELINA MOHSIN

commitment to continental Europe, signifying a sharp downgrading of British attention to the Commonwealth. But the Commonwealth survived that blow, not least because of the devotion of Queen Elizabeth to its peoples and ideals, but also due to the extent other member

IN 1973, the Commonwealth's leading economy, the UK, finally joined the European Economic Community (EEC) to the dismay of other members. This was seen as a decisive

risking a considerable reduction in UK trade with the EU, there is a new UK interest in free trade deals cultivating wider global markets. This in turn has led Brexit supporters to a revived recognition of the hitherto neglected trade potential of the Commonwealth. A Commonwealth Business Forum meeting in Malta last November reaffirmed defence of free trade and drew attention to work already underway, helping over 30 smaller Commonwealth member countries to integrate into the global trading system, and develop their competitiveness.

The Malta initiative led to a London meeting in March 2017 of trade ministers and representatives from 35 Commonwealth countries including Bangladesh. This trade and energy meeting

private sector. Private sector representatives present at the meeting recognised the advantage of working closely with the Commonwealth Business Forum. Britain is working closely with the private sectors of Commonwealth countries before the next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) to be held in April 2018 in London.

This Commonwealth advantage is a notable, but hitherto little recognised factor in global trade. The UK may well try to develop this as part of a post-Brexit drive to focus on new global markets outside the EU. But could it also mean that the Commonwealth might have a significant new potential role for all its members as a global trading

London meeting of trade ministers recognised this and work is going ahead to formulate recommendations for new ways to promote trade and investment. These will be presented for consideration at the 2018 London CHOGM. One idea certain to be considered is the adoption of a visa-free system for business visits between Commonwealth countries. Moreover, there are already other Commonwealth organisations which can be further strengthened such as the Commonwealth Business School, the Commonwealth Youth Programme and the Association of Commonwealth Universities and Commonwealth Scholarships. Some in Britain hope to create a Commonwealth free trade area compliant with WTO rules.

A new UK Commonwealth minister has been appointed and ministerial and official meetings are taking place to realise the Commonwealth's full potential. This potential goes far beyond trade and investment. There is a growing threat of violence and extremism in this globalised world. Since the 2016 CHOGM Britain and Australia have funded a new unit in the Commonwealth to counter violent extremism. It will enable members to share experiences, expertise and strategies to protect their citizens better. Moreover, human rights and freedom of press are being given top priority before the next CHOGM.

The aim of the next CHOGM in April 2018 is to "firmly reposition Commonwealth as an organisation of global importance in the 21st century". One key factor in its future may be South Asia. The central importance of India is recognised, not only as a rising giant economy and a large segment of humanity, but for the depth of old civilisations and cultures in South Asia. Bangladesh, a country whose economic growth has continually risen, can play a major role in trade, investment and counter terrorism.

The Commonwealth 'family' links an immense diversity of people with their own individual histories, cultures and circumstances. There are periodic strains in any family and the Commonwealth is no exception as evidenced when South Africa was expelled from the Commonwealth in the days of apartheid.

Now Britain, after Brexit, aims to generate stronger trade relations with Commonwealth member countries. New trading treaties with major Commonwealth markets like India, Canada, Australia and other fast growing economies like Bangladesh to revive a Commonwealth trading bloc could be mutually advantageous. But will this happen? Will Britain invest enough in money and initiatives not only to enhance its trade and investment but also to promote Commonwealth values?

The writer is a former ambassador.



Queen Elizabeth delivers a speech during the opening ceremony of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) at the Mediterranean Conference Centre in Valletta in 2015.

countries shared its values and valued its services.

The Commonwealth links 52 member states across six continents and has a combined population of 2.4 billion. Headed by the Queen of Great Britain, the Commonwealth brought former colonies together to foster greater cooperation, parliamentary democracy, freedom of press, good governance, peace, and cooperation in the cultural and socio-economic development of member states. Membership is voluntary and members can choose to leave it, as Pakistan did in 1972 to register its protest when the Commonwealth recognised Bangladesh as a sovereign state.

Now with Brexit marking another sharp turn in Britain's policy orientation, and

noted that despite the huge diversity of Commonwealth member states in size and development, trade between them had been growing faster than the world average. It is expected to total over USD 1 trillion by 2020. This faster growth was hailed as the 'Commonwealth advantage'. Studies had shown trading costs were 19 percent lower between Commonwealth countries, as compared with the global average. This surprisingly substantial cost advantage was explained as arising from legal and administrative similarities between Commonwealth members and from the trust created by the Commonwealth's long background of mutual ties and organic growth. It was agreed to improve coordination between member countries' institutions and the

body?

Many UK right-wing conservative Eurosceptics claim that new trade deals with Commonwealth and other countries could more than compensate for any loss of easy access to the EU single market. They believe that EU membership has hampered Britain from taking full advantage of massive new markets opened up in Asia and other fast developing regions in the Commonwealth. Many others, including much of UK business, strongly dispute this.

Even if some Eurosceptics are over-ambitious, that still does not mean that the Commonwealth advantage could not be fostered and developed to the advantage of all member states. The

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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How effective is the ban on "seating service"?

The transport owners' move to stop seating services has created confusion among passengers due to the withdrawal of buses from different routes in Dhaka. A small number of buses are still charging fares as before, in some cases even more. It has been especially inconvenient for office-goers.

The BRTA's decision had initially given us hope of reprieve from being cheated by bus owners through extra fares. But we are becoming doubtful as to how successful the move will be, as the rule is already being flouted. Unless concrete and effective measures are taken by BRTA, this anarchy of extra charges will continue with silent support from bus owners.

Khondaker Shahirul Islam
Gulshan

Build a bridge over Panguchi

A great tragedy took place in the Panguchi River at Morelgonj on March 28. The waves created by a navy gunboat overturned a trawler overcrowded with people that was crossing the river. Only 14 dead bodies were found and many others remain undiscovered.

We, the people of Morelgonj and Sharonkhola, have been demanding a bridge to be built over the Panguchi. We even formed a human chain of civilians from the two upazilas on Pahela Baishakh. Sharonkhola, known for its natural beauty, is very close to the Sundarbans. A bridge would also allow tourists to go to the Sundarbans through this area.

We hope that our honourable Prime Minister will take necessary steps to meet our demand.

Sayek Ahmed Sajib
Sharonkhola, Bagerhat