

City's drainage in total mess!

Too many cooks and too much 'broth'

RESIDENTS of large sections of Dhaka city have been facing waterlogging for days on end during every monsoon season. With seven different authorities overseeing drainage, it is hardly surprising that there is little coordination to alleviate the situation. Unplanned urbanisation has brought with it problems of solid waste filling up the few city canals still free of land grabbing by unscrupulous real estate companies. We have to contend with a lack of maintenance on the 2,000km of feeder drains that are supposed to carry rainwater to canals that are sorely lacking in capacity to do the job. Indeed, with pavements in the city preventing run-off of rainwater, it ends up flooding the streets.

A city the size of Dhaka should have had ample wetlands and floodplains to absorb the rainwater. The opposite has happened. We have allowed unscrupulous business entities to grab canals, ponds and water bodies in and around the city. There are hardly any flood flow zones; ditches and canals have either had their access blocked or have simply disappeared.

It is high time we had one single authority to overlook the drainage system of Dhaka city. Without it, we will continue to have haphazard development and maintenance of the various components that comprise the drainage system. There is little logic in having different departments maintaining segments of the system where none of these bodies have an overall picture of the situation, and hence it makes sense to have a single authority to oversee development and maintenance of drainage in Dhaka which could alleviate our collective suffering.

Bangladeshis stuck abroad

Why are they taking such risks?

A MIDST crackdown on illegal migrants and workers, the Malaysian authorities have detained a total of 789 Bangladeshis who did not have proper documentations for staying in the country. Some of them said that it was their employers who had delayed and eventually failed to apply for an enforcement card (e-card), preferring to have them working rather than straightening out their papers, moreover, owing them months of salary.

The e-card would have allowed the labourers to temporarily stay in Malaysia, buying them time to obtain valid travel documents. But it appears that their employers had preferred to have them continue working on illegally, as that would give them leverage over the workers who, by lacking proper documentation, would be at their employers' mercy. This kind of worker exploitation across borders is not a new phenomenon, but is a problem that the Malaysian authorities must address at their end.

Consequently, the Bangladeshi authorities must address the causes why migrants and workers are staying abroad illegally. As this newspaper reported, around 2,000 Bangladeshis, mostly migrants from Iran, Lebanon and Jordan, are currently stuck in Turkey as their attempts to illegally enter Europe were foiled. This raises the question as to why they would risk their lives to try to enter Europe, if not in search of greener pastures.

And if that is the case, then it is a lack of opportunities at home that is forcing thousands of people to travel abroad, at great risks, in desperation of finding some means of sustenance. This is something that the authorities should address seriously.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Harmful chemicals in food

Bangladesh has a problem: food. Excessive use of chemicals (like DDT and formalin) by farmers has become a matter of major public concern when purchasing fish, fruits, vegetables, milk, etc. According to a survey conducted by the National Food Safety Laboratory, with support from the Food and Agriculture Organization, most vegetables sold in Bangladesh are adulterated. But vegetables aren't all; even chicken and spices are not exempt from the list of poisoned foods! The end result has civilians purchasing and consuming harmful chemicals like lead chromium along with their meals.

Another consequence is faltering nutrition. We've all heard of the proverb "An apple a day keeps the doctor away". Since childhood we've been taught that certain foods are integral for good health. But the failing agriculture system forces people to avoid foods they should eat in fear of the unknown in them. These chemicals also hurt the environment, as they travel beyond farms as runoff, potentially causing further destruction to ecosystems in Bangladesh.

However, non-harmful pesticides and fertilisers, plant hormones and manure have become increasingly available due to a push from the Agriculture Ministry. If orchestrated correctly, methods like vermicomposting and polyhouse farming can be an even more profitable alternative for farmers. Horticulture officers need only to enforce the use of these solutions.

There has been much improvement, as there seems to be more awareness about this issue than ever before. Several mobile courts have tried to combat contamination, but more needs to be done. Everyone demands "a better tomorrow" but we must also stand together in the fight for a healthier tomorrow.

Zubair Khaled Huq
Dhaka

Of rats and rains



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

ON July 2, 2017, the Anti-Corruption Commission sued 61 individuals associated with Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) for corruption and mismanagement in the construction of dams in the haor region in Sylhet, pushing back against claims that nature rather than human action was responsible for the devastating effects of the recent flash floods there.

The anti-graft body has also asked the government to take action against the secretary of the water resources ministry, the BWDB director general and 14 other officials for "gross negligence in discharging their duties," according to a report by *The Daily Star*.

This is a laudable step in the anti-corruption movement in Bangladesh. It marks a welcome departure from the long-held tradition of showing leniency to state-level corruption, which has been repeatedly cited as the single biggest challenge to development in the country. In their defence, the ministry and the BWDB had mentioned reasons that would seem extraordinary. They blamed excessive rain and rats for the internal erosion of dam foundations, which were either damaged or washed away as soon as floodwater hit them. They did not, however, pause to consider what made the foundations so weak in the first place, and completely overlooked the possibility of any irregularity that may have taken place in the construction process.

Frankly, I was rather intrigued by these claims by the BWDB. Not only did they have the audacity to refuse to see what was obvious to everyone else, they also offered a cathartic experience for anyone troubled by the sufferings of the haor people when they accused the rats of foul play. In their minds it made perfect sense. Rats and rain made fine bedfellows.

I remember visiting an installation exhibition sometime in 2016 that dealt with rats. More specifically, the effects of rats, on the Santal community that lived for hundreds of years as hunters-gatherers before choosing an agrarian lifestyle. The exhibition sought to show how rats emerged as a public nuisance in the process of this transformation, invading the households, village bazaars and farmlands after farmers turned to fertilisers to boost agricultural

productivity. Rats can be resistant to toxins. So while other rodents and insects started to perish under the effect of pesticides, the rats started to grow. And who doesn't know what happens when rats overpopulate!

The idea behind the show was impressive. The whole gallery was swarming with earthen rats and relics from a bygone time; a projector nearby was playing some surreal music that added to the appeal of the past-meet-present theme. However, I couldn't help

possibly have such a devastating impact on a region that is no stranger to flood. The haors, because of the nature of their formation, remain under water most of the year, and during the dry season when water starts receding, farmers use the opportunity to cultivate crops, especially rice. This seasonal submergence is also kept in mind when the human settlements are built, on earthen mounds, making them look like islands during monsoon.

This year, flood came about a month

district administration, the number of the affected peasant families was over three lakh.

In the haor, the dam is the only thing that separates life from death. It keeps the floodwater at bay, saves the crops, and keeps people safe even though combat against natural calamities and harsh weather conditions is a daily reality. BWDB engineers, contractors and other staffers play the vital role of ensuring that the dams stand when they are needed. But



More than two lakh hectares of agricultural land were submerged and nearly a million tonnes of Boro crops lost during the recent flash floods in the haor region in northeastern Bangladesh. The picture shows a pile of hay being transported through the river.

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

but notice an absence – or tacit denial – of the 'human' factor in all the problems blamed on our non-human neighbours.

Nature, contrary to popular belief, does not work in mysterious ways. Conventional wisdom acquired over centuries as well as the rise of technology have made it possible for us to foresee changes about to occur in the natural world. It's human nature that seems mysterious to me. And the fact that we often tend to ignore the consequences of our own action makes us very dangerous, too.

This same tendency to deny, and accept responsibility for one's own action, has been noticed during the flash floods in the haor districts of northeastern Bangladesh. One fails to comprehend how rats and rain could

earlier than usual, sweeping away the fragile dams and inundating vast swaths of land before the farmers could harvest their crops. It was met with lukewarm response initially. Those in charge of ensuring the safety of the life and livelihoods of the residents seemed to be in a state of denial. But after the media started to produce shocking details about the situation on the ground, officials scrambled to control damage, distributing relief supplies including food and medicine in the flood-hit areas and so on.

In the end, more than two lakh hectares of agricultural land in Sunamganj, Netrokona, Sylhet, Moulvibazar and Kishoreganj were submerged, and nearly a million tonnes of Boro crops were lost. In Sunamganj alone, according to an estimate by the

ACC move, against such a high number of officials, laid bare the truth behind the shiny promises and questioned the board's capacity to function without being eroded by corruption.

As for the ACC, despite all its limitations as an institution essentially controlled by the government, it will now be expected to follow up on its move without bias and prejudice, and demonstrate its willingness to see it through till the end. Hopefully, those playing with the lives of people for their petty gains will not be able to escape justice, and the haor people can live without having to worry every time there is a flood around the corner.

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HOLEY ARTISAN ATTACK

Some unanswered questions

MOYUKH MAHTAB

A year after the Holey Artisan terrorist attack, mourning the untimely deaths of the victims, we have not sufficiently focused on two names. Besides the patrons of the café, there were two more individuals who were as much victims of the attack: Saiful Chowkidar, a pizza chef at the bakery, and Zakir Hossain Shaon, who used to do the dishes. They were both initially claimed to be suspects, but later investigations pointed to the contrary. The police is yet to make a clear statement about their innocence or guilt. And if they are innocent, as nothing has been found against them, it is important that their names be delinked from the taint of being associated with the attack and proper respect be shown to them.

suffered "splinter wounds" and there were "marks of beating" on his body ("Confusion follows death of 2 staff", *The Daily Star*, July 11, 2016).

In the meantime, his family had been frantically searching for him. By the time they heard of him being admitted in DMCH and visited him there, he was close to death. His mother, distraught, told reporters that her son bore assault marks and swellings all over his body. Parents and family members, who saw him there, told newspapers that Shaon "seemed to have lost his mind and kept saying, 'Please don't hit me anymore.'" ("Confusion follows death of 2 staff", *The Daily Star*). Police officials told the media initially that Shaon was on the suspect list, but the case that was filed in connection with the attack did not mention his name. The last his mother heard from him was when he called

was there during the siege, on condition of anonymity, told *The Daily Star*: "As the pizza maker, Saiful worked at the entrance of the bakery and he was probably the first to be attacked and beaten by the gunmen. Seeing this, most of us ran into the bathroom." He claimed to have seen a gunman pointing his gun at Saiful when he and eight others were forced out of the bathroom by other militants ("Confusion follows death of 2 staff", *The Daily Star*).

On the other hand, four days after the attack, *Reuters* reported, quoting a police official investigating the attack, that one of the men shot dead during the siege may have been a hostage killed by mistake: "Confusion over exactly how many gunmen were involved was at least partly cleared up on Tuesday, when police named Saiful Islam Chowkidar, a pizza maker at the Holey Artisan Bakery, as among the six people security forces killed when they stormed the building to end a 12-hour stand-off."

"He may not be involved," Saiful Islam, a police official investigating the attack, told *Reuters*, adding Chowkidar's death was still being investigated. "In the police filing Chowkidar's name was included among 21 hostages killed by [the] attackers" ("Bangladesh police say may have shot hostage, missed attack warnings", *Reuters*, July 5, 2016).

A year after the incident we need to know the details of the death in custody of Shaon, and clarification of Chowkidar's role. We had heard after the raid that the police were looking into whether Chowkidar had any militant ties. What have they found? These are questions which should have been answered. Shaon's death and his parents' allegations point towards torture in custody of someone who seems to have been as much a victim of the attack as the others. After a year, it should have been resolved and communicated if Chowkidar's death was an accident or part of the raid to kill the militants.

Alongside those we have remembered and paid tribute to in the past few days, Shaon and Chowkidar too deserve to be shown the same respect. Instead, what we witnessed was indifference, as Shaon's mother was barred from entering the memorial this July 1, and only allowed to do so after journalists intervened ("A mother's quest for justice, answers", *The Daily Star*, July 2, 2017). There is also mostly silence when it comes to Chowkidar. In the aftermath of countrywide crackdown on militants, the questions raised by HT Imam, political adviser to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, have been forgotten too. He told *Reuters* on July 5, 2016 that it needs to be looked into "whether there was an intelligence failure" and that the "way the police and the RAB acted in the early hours raises questions". The law enforcement narratives of the attack have only focused on heroics of the day and not on the security failure and the backdrop which led to the attack.

A year on, these are the questions we want answers to, alongside how and why the two restaurant employees died, and to ensure that they not be one day falsely branded along with the terrorists or become nameless victims among many others whom we have forgotten.

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PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

Mother of Md Zakir Hossain Shaon in tears holding a framed photo of her son at the Holey Artisan Bakery on July 1, 2017. Shaon, an employee of the restaurant, died of injuries in hospital about a week after the attack.

Here's what we know from the numerous reports by local and international newspapers and agencies following the attack. Shaon, aged 19, managed to escape from inside the bakery a long time before the early morning raid by commandos. Pictures and video footage showed him being taken by law enforcement, his chest bloody. The pictures do not show a person critically injured, but someone who had just escaped with his life. Two days later, he was taken to the DMCH, where he died on July 8, a week after the attack ("Detained kitchen staff dies of injuries", *The Daily Star*, July 10, 2016). Hospital and morgue sources said Shaon

her hours before the attack to say that he received his Eid bonus and would be going home soon.

Saiful Chowkidar, the pizza chef, died on July 2 during the commando raid. What little information we have also points to him being a collateral victim, and not one of the militants. He was not among the five who entered and started the armed siege of the café. Subsequent reports have named him among the 22 victims and not the five attackers. After the siege, he was however named as one of the militants in the case ("Confusion follows death of 2 staff", *The Daily Star*). When his death was reported, a staff of Holey who