

Sunamganj haor project in trouble

Only 20 percent work in six years!

WHAT was supposed to be a priority project to save 29 upazilas of Sylhet from flash floods has turned out to be a classic case of mismanagement for Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB). The four-year project is now in its sixth year and about a fifth of the work completed, the Tk 704 crore project is in a state of disarray. We fail to see how such an important project was not prioritised in the face of the massive floods the country is experiencing of late. The excuses put up by BWDB failed to impress policymakers (in a recent appraisal meeting) with less than half the drainage regulators constructed, none of the 29 drainage outlets and 35 causeways and 22 irrigation inlets have been set up. The excuse that funds have not been forthcoming in the annual development programme budget does not hold water, especially when we take into account that there have been 11 project directors in the course of 6 years.

We understand that the Anti-Corruption Commission has arrested some contractors who happen to have party affiliation. While the probe into alleged financial management is a step in the right direction, the question is why there was no oversight into this crucial project that could have saved farmers in Sunamganj their boro paddy and benefitted some six million people? Equally important is to question the quality of our project management and execution at local government level, which is obviously lagging, as is apparent from the rate of implementation of the annual development programme. The question of extending the project by another two years can only yield benefits if irregularities in project planning and implementation are addressed. Otherwise, the haor project will end up as yet another footnote in a long line of projects that went haywire.

Barcelona attack

Newer terrorist tactics need novel countermeasures

WE condemn the mindless terrorist attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils, Spain, leaving at least 19 people dead and more than 130 people seriously injured. A night of terror in Catalonia began with a botched attempt to carry out a gas bomb attack that, if successful, would have been far more destructive. Twenty-four hours later, however, scenes of carnage emerged in two popular tourist destinations, packed with tourists from around the world, in an attack similar to those in Nice and London.

Like other European countries, Spain has been the target of Islamic State's repeated terror plots, all of which have been foiled until this one got through. After the Madrid train bombing in 2004, which remains the deadliest terrorist attack on European soil in this century, Spain has developed one of the most intensive and vigorous anti-terrorism apparatus on the continent. That along with relatively better integration of Muslim community in the society is cited as the reason of Spain's relative success in tackling terrorism. Unlike its many other Western counterparts, the Spanish authorities didn't unleash any massive crackdown in the aftermath of these attacks that could target the wider Muslim community in general, because that's exactly what those fanatics would want to see. Success in anti-terrorism lies partly in judicious conduct of counter terror programmes.

However, what is noticeable is the change of tactics by terrorists which includes more indiscriminate selection of targets and use of vehicles as a weapon. In Europe alone since July 2016 there have been seven attacks using vehicles. And this should be a lesson for those countries that have faced the scourge. We should remember that a method easily usable is quickly replicated.

What about the fourth estate?



NAZMUL AHASAN

SINCE the fall of the military dictator HM Ershad in the early nineties, Bangladesh has largely been a democracy. Two democratically elected political

parties have mostly governed the country ever since.

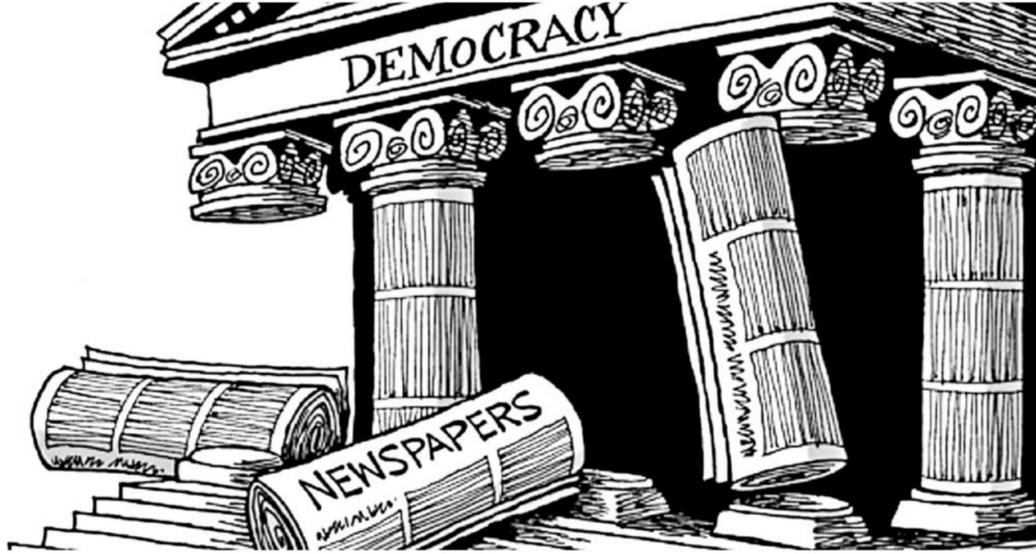
Apart from the restoration of an electoral system, another highly-anticipated development in the post-Ershad era was the annulment of multiple articles of the "Special Powers Act" that eased press restrictions to a large extent, resulting in what was dubbed by many as the "mushroom growth" of media houses.

After Khaleda Zia's BNP formed the government in 1991 Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, largely perceived as a courageous statesman during his two terms as president of the country (one with executive power), went back to the judiciary to resume his role as chief justice. With a democratically elected government, a courageous judiciary, and a booming media industry, one couldn't think of a better restart.

Political environment back then was vibrant, to say the least, with a dynamic opposition camp that constantly kept the government in check. Most importantly, the ruling party didn't have the absolute majority in parliament, which kept it from being too wayward because of its dependence on the support of the opposition parties to make constitutional amendments. Politicians back then were also less confrontational.

Now, more than two and a half decades later, our politics is in complete disarray, with the real opposition being almost non-existent. The integrity of all vital institutions is in decline.

Temporarily, a precarious stability, mainly due to the absence of street politics, appears to support the economic growth. In reality, a tiny crack in this "stability" may have grave consequences. The Gulshan terror attack, for example, had a much bigger impact on the garments industry than initially anticipated.



Society, most importantly, is more polarised than ever before. Like the politicians who deeply distrust each other, people are now also divided across the politico-ideological spectrum. Unfortunately, this polarity has also gripped our press. Journalism, which requires its professionals to be impartial and objective, is plagued with a brazenly partisan culture that fails to hold those in power responsible and accepts the official narrative as gospel truth.

Against this backdrop, something interesting has happened recently. The Supreme Court has given a 799-page judgement that upheld the HC verdict declaring the 16th amendment to the Constitution illegal. The verdict has been hailed by independent analysts as historic but the court's observations on the existing political climate in Bangladesh infuriated the ruling party, which unleashed a concerted campaign against what it deems "irrelevant opinion" of the chief justice to play down the judgement.

All the while, another important case is impending in the apex court about whether the executive officers can run mobile courts. It involves the separation of the judiciary from the influence of the executive branch of the government.

Both cases have triggered fierce debates about whether the apex court can overturn decisions by the parliament's two-third majority, and whether the judiciary is fully separated from the executive branch.

Professor Shakhawat Ali Khan, a veteran professor of journalism, has recently told a private audience that while everyone seems to be obsessed with the power battle within the three branches of the state (i.e. parliamentary, judiciary and executive), the role of the press as the fourth estate of the state remains largely unaddressed in public discourse. While everyone in their respective branch is fully aware of what's at stake, the journalistic community, however, seems little concerned about their deserved place in democracy.

"The biggest thing that saddens me about Bangladesh is the lack of solidarity in the press for the press," observed Irene Khan, the former Amnesty International chief. In other words, the media men have failed to stand in solidarity with their fellow targeted professionals simply because of political differences.

One could remember that when the Barack Obama administration in the US excluded Fox News in a round of interviews, other media

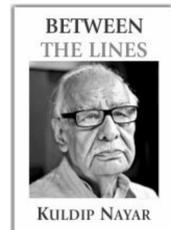
outlets—including rival institutions—vehemently opposed the move and eventually got the decision reversed. Fox News reciprocated the favour when the Donald Trump administration barred journalists of many prominent outlets in the White House press briefings. That's how solidarity beyond competition and political ideology within the press helps it to become a pillar so distinctive that it can challenge the remaining three estates of a state.

The avenues of expressing solidarity are limited because individuals aligned with the establishment take over journalistic organisations. When journalistic bodies abandon the basic practice of democracy themselves, how can one expect the press to be a pillar of democracy?

The press must have its own identity well beyond political divide. A journalist must not abdicate his or her credibility as an objective and impartial newsperson by political or other preference. If the collective journalistic sense beyond the border of personal belief and interest doesn't develop, the press will never become what it aspires to be.

Nazmul Ahasan is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

How unsafe are Muslims in India?



KULDEEP NAYAR

IN a farewell message the outgoing vice-president Hamid Ansari said that Muslims do not feel safe in the country. Instead of introspecting on what he said, the RSS and the BJP

have denounced him. Some have gone to the extent of saying that he could migrate to a country where he would feel safe.

The unkindest cut came from Prime Minister Narendra Modi who said that Ansari could now pursue his agenda. A few others, occupying high positions, also made more or less a similar remark. There was not an iota of examination by the Hindu leaders and thus a great opportunity to disarm the Muslims of

had raised. Ansari was not saying whether he was safe or not personally. The outgoing vice-president was only conveying the fears of Muslims.

Personal attacks on Ansari would not do. The government leaders should ponder over what the outgoing vice-president has said and how the majority community could make amends to retrieve the situation. But the message has not been taken in the spirit it should have been.

RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat has reportedly endorsed the view that since Ansari did not feel happy in India he could go elsewhere. As head of a Hindu organisation, Bhagwat's remark attains the representative character, unfortunately reducing the whole thing to the perennial debate of Hindus versus Muslims.

Since Ansari's remark is a public

leaders in the past. In fact, some celebrities also have joined the chorus. Take for instance, what film star Aamir Khan remarked a couple of years ago when he took potshots at politicians, while referring to the fear his wife Kiran Rao had expressed about India's growing intolerance.

"When I chat with Kiran (his wife) at home, she says 'Should we move out of India?' That's a disastrous and big statement for Kiran to make. She fears for her child. She fears about what the atmosphere around us will be. She feels scared to open the newspapers every day. That does indicate that there is this sense of growing disquiet, there is growing despondency apart from alarm. You feel why this is happening, you feel low. That sense does exist in me," Aamir said.

Aamir, while speaking at an award function, also endorsed the returning of

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PHOTO: PRAKASH SINGH/AFAP

their fear was lost.

True, the vice-president could have made the same remarks earlier and submitted his resignation while in office. But that would have created another kind of a crisis which the constitution experts would have found hard to sort out. That way the country would have been thrown into a cauldron of doubt and suspicion.

The majority community must try to find out why every Muslim leader raises reservation about his community's welfare whenever he gets the opportunity, particularly on the eve of quitting office. The remark that Ansari could go to any country of his choice does not in any way meet the point he

property and coming as it did from the country's vice-president, it should be debated at all responsible forums, including parliament. The government at the centre has constituted in the past a commission to find out how the Muslims felt. Justice Rajinder Sachar, who led the commission, said in his report that the Muslims were treated worse than the dalits. And he found that West Bengal, after nearly three decades of communist rule, had only a 2.5 percent educated Muslims. Time is ripe to have another commission to find out if Justice Sachar's report had made any difference.

Unfortunately, similar remarks of regret have been made by other Muslim

awards by creative people saying it was a way to express their dissatisfaction or disappointment. "People who are our elected representatives, people who we select to look after us for five years, State or centre...when people take law into their hands, we look upon these people to take a strong stance, to make a strong statement, speed up the legal process, when we see that happening there is a sense of security but when we don't see that happening there is a sense of insecurity," said the celebrity actor.

Understandably, the BJP reacted to his remark and completely rejected the comment of Aamir. "He is not scared but he is trying to scare people. India gave

him all the laurels and respect. He should not forget that India made him a star," said BJP spokesperson Shah Nawaz Hussain. Congress vice-president stoutly defended the actor and suggested that the Modi government should reach out to the people to know why they felt disturbed.

Rahul in a tweet said: "Instead of branding all those who question the government and Modi as unpatriotic, anti-national or 'motivated', the government would do better to reach out to people to understand what's disturbing them." But the BJP spokesman, as usual, pooh-poohed Rahul's comment saying that there was a conspiracy going on in the country to defame the nation!

The real problem is the line drawn by Radcliffe on the basis of religion. He did regret the killings in the wake of partition, but did not change the line. Those on the other side of the line are people of Pakistan who slowly and gradually are becoming part of the Islamic world. Fundamentalism has taken a firm grip.

There is practically no Hindu and Sikh on the other side of the border. Christians form the majority among the minorities in Pakistan. Their complaint is that the churches have been destroyed and there is a forced conversion. The democratically elected prime minister is doing whatever he can. But the last word is with the army. Unfortunately, the army is also getting contaminated.

Words of Ansari have great relevance because a soft kind of Hindutva is spreading in India. Those who are at the helm of affairs are pushing the division because elections fought on the basis of Hindus and Muslims are bound to benefit the Hindus. The fabric of secular India is being torn bit by bit. It's regrettable that ideology of secularism followed in the last seven decades is in great danger.

Kuldeep Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Fake and adulterated fertilisers

According to news reports, fake and adulterated fertilisers have engulfed the local markets, due to which our agricultural production has been hampered. Because of these fertilisers, the fertility of the soil is also deteriorating. When farmers purchase these fertilisers, they don't know if these are genuine because they don't have any kits to test them. The concerned government department should locate the manufacturers and sellers of such fertilisers and punish them. Besides, kits should be developed for farmers so that they can test the fertilisers.

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Repair the roads of Dhaka

Almost all the roads and lanes of Dhaka city are in bad shape. Uncoordinated development works, incessant rain and the lack of a proper drainage system have been making these roads totally unusable for vehicles. In addition, careless dumping of garbage on roads is a major problem in our city. But the concerned authorities seem to have turned a blind eye to these problems. We urge them to immediately repair all the city roads.

Sumon Paul
 On e-mail