

A departure from the norm

Examples worth emulating

WE have written much about development projects facing major hurdles in the country that continue to suffer years of delay and cost overruns. Hence, it is very refreshing to find three major bridges being constructed by Japanese contractors that are not only going to be commissioned ahead of time, but well within budget too! The three bridges, being constructed on Sitalakkhya, Meghna and Gumti rivers, are on track. What comes as a surprise that our project officials were able to knock down project costs by nearly Tk800 crores that involved painstaking bargaining of prices on every component of the deal, and this shows that when there is intent on our side, we can do a good job at negotiating prices that are beneficial for the country.

The question here is that when it is possible to keep a Tk7,677 crore project on track through proper monitoring, why cannot we replicate the experience across the board for all major infrastructure projects? How is it that many projects, being built by other foreign contractors are years behind in delivery and handover? Policymakers should scrutinise what our Roads and Bridges Division authorities did right to make this happen because it is not merely a question of cost overruns that adversely affect development in this country; the years of delays effectively throttles the economy from performing positively. Should the handover of these projects happen on time, we hope the results are emulated so that future critical projects can be completed on time.

Misuse of climate funds

WDB must ensure accountability

A recent Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) study on the use of public money for implementing climate projects by the Water Development Board (WDB) unearthed some disturbing findings. They show that in four out of six such projects, a group of politically powerful men have used their influence to award contracts to their "own men." Besides the blatant nepotism, other irregularities were also found, including sloppy implementation, embezzlement and due processes not being followed. These (mal)practices, as TIB pointed out, are symptomatic of a failure to ensure good governance, transparency and accountability by the WDB.

These findings are serious: the WDB was reportedly provided 40 percent of the total Climate Change Trust Fund money. Therefore, how effectively these public funds are being used is of public concern. The projects were undertaken to build and rebuild river embankments, infrastructures, polders, protecting river banks and dredging rivers to reduce climate risks—all issues of public welfare. It is unfortunate that a secretary, two local lawmakers, a central leader of the ruling party and a relative of a former minister should be found involved in the nepotism. Infrastructures in some projects were found to be already damaged, and in one case, the contractor sold several roadside trees and then embezzled the money. None of the projects were found to have been audited.

The TIB based their study on interviews of around 600 people, including project directors, WDB staff, locals and contractors, conducted over a period of two years. Therefore, these are not allegations to be dismissed offhandedly. And as we have seen in the past few months, faulty implementation by contractors and lack of oversight are the norm in many other projects across the country. We hope that the TIB report comes as a call to identify the issues that impede the proper use of public funds and prompt an immediate investigation. Otherwise the malaise of corruption and irregularities that we are all too familiar with will only spread more.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Recruit support staff for govt hospitals

Government hospitals have been acutely suffering from support staff shortages for many years. The Supreme Court declared the previous recruitment policy, among others, illegal because it had been formulated during HM Ershad's military regime, but the government is yet to come up with a new policy. Now, approximately 46,000 posts of support-staff remain vacant at public hospitals across the country. The hospitals are running with the help of unrecognised helpers, mostly living on tips.

The government should immediately start filling up the vacancies.
Biplob Chandra Das, University of Dhaka

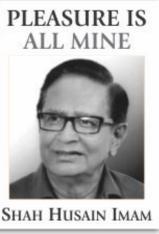
Distribution channels for flood victims

A recent video clip that went viral on the Internet shows the helplessness of people in flood-hit areas of our country. The video shows some victims of a flood-affected area scrambling for relief in knee-deep water as volunteers from a nearby boat hurled the bags to them.

Apparently, there was no queue; people were standing there in a disorderly manner and trying to snatch relief bags as if it was a competition. The relief was evidently not enough. It was painful to see that many people couldn't manage to get a single bag.

The people of flood-affected areas are in dire need of help. All of us should come forward to help them as much as we can and the authorities concerned should also create proper distribution channels.
Nayan, Bijoy Smarani

Rumble of a distant thunder?



PLEASURE IS ALL MINE
SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

HOW much do the words of Winston Churchill, addressed to the former Soviet Union, ring out through the mists of the time of the Cold War: "Jaw-jaw is better than war-war." The words of wisdom and statesmanship from a Second World War veteran are infinitely more relevant today in an age of nuclear proliferation, placing the button of annihilation at the hand of a desperado.

By his sabre-rattling standards, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un last week might have sung a lullaby to the children of Guam! He would "hold off" his threatened missile test on the US strategic island 50 kilometres off her South Pacific coast, he had declared.

In purely diplomatic terms, North Korea's backtracking on her threat to fire missiles near the US territory of Guam meant either a diminished provocation to the US, or a postponed threat.

The threat posturing is borne out by Kim's words: "He will monitor more the foolish and stupid conduct of the Yankees before he decides whether or not carry out further tests." Read that with Pyongyang's apparent scaling down of intimidation to the US, the coupling of the ploys aimed at securing a stop to US-South Korea military exercise slated for August 21.

But "the invasive rehearsal" got underway as senior US commanders dismissed calls to pause or downsize the exercise, considering it crucial to counter threats from Pyongyang. North Korea "vows merciless retaliation to the US-South Korea military drill."

The rotund young man rather lightly carries a thoroughly ill-reputed baggage: Doing his uncle to death allegedly by a "ground missile at a practice session." His half-brother, reportedly poisoned at the Kuala Lumpur airport, died in "mysterious circumstances" as the cliché goes.

Seriously, the North Korean dictator holds the view that Saddam Hussain and Colonel Gaddafi, having abandoned their projects of building weapons of mass destruction (WMD), had paved the way for their undoing. He vows not to follow in their footsteps.

Has the Chinese pressure been



Resumption of the Six-Party talks could help break the impasse; but the common concerns of the two Koreas must be taken into account.

weighing down on Kim lately to induce a thinly veiled engaging approach on his part to Washington? President Trump had just issued an executive order "to look into the nature, scope and extent of infringement of Intellectual Property Rights of the United States by China. Washington added though, the move had nothing to do with North Korea. But the timing of Trump's order might have been a reminder to Beijing to leverage Pyongyang against misadventure.

It is felt, however, that a resumption of the Six-Party talks could help break the impasse; but a pivotal part of that exercise must be to address the common concerns of the two Koreas without any exceeding geopolitical bias.

North Korea's wish list is unattainably ambitious though: Achieving a formal nuclear deterrent capability and reunification of the Koreas under his leadership. His defiance results from a regime change apprehension. Only China can influence the North Korean dictator, to stay away from nuclear adventurism.

As for North Korea "punching above its weight", let it not be lost on anyone that for a helmsman on the lunatic fringe, a finger on the nuclear button, gives him a de facto deterrent capability, more precisely, a blackmailing capacity. In reality, it is actually more dangerous



PHOTO: AFP

than that, as it conjures up a very large suicide bomber in the shape of a whole nation!

While North Korea is apparently on a rethink mode, a huge domestic problem plagues the US. The trouble started over the attempted removal of the Confederate General Robert E Lee's statue by an alt-right group of protesters at Charlottesville, whereupon, an alt-right group converged on the scene to resist it.

Amid scenes of Nazi flags waving and a car driven by a white supremacist allegedly being ploughed on purpose into a group of counter protestors, a woman died and 19 others were injured.

President Trump through last Saturday to Monday blundered in his reactions; every time he tried to fine-tune his version to square up with the public criticism or give traction to his support base, he would sink deeper into re-affirming where his sympathies lay.

Even the president's daughter, Ivanka Trump, commented that her father had lost a massive opportunity for uniting America by blaming it "on all sides". The KKK, neo-Nazis, white supremacists were cosied up to while the liberal, anti-slavery, left constituency was ditched.

After the Charlottesville riots, a black CEO of a firm resigned triggering a series of resignations from CEOs across

the corporate sector.

The backlash has been wide, ranging from Virginia to Boston to Phoenix, Arizona, where there were massive protest rallies against far-right extremists. The governor of Arizona, an outspoken campaigner for Trump as well as the mayor of Phoenix, told the US president not to visit the state because it will fuel racial tensions. And it did. In fact, the Arizona governor did not attend the rally. A significant number of Republicans have openly opposed Trump's divisive campaign.

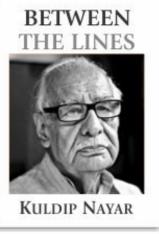
The president's agenda of "clearing the swamp", meaning the Washington establishment, has turned out to be a cruel joke because of the president failure to build a team around him.

What is distressing to note is that he has threatened military intervention in Venezuela. Trump is being overbearing with Afghanistan and Iran too.

A multiple crises have a way of merging and "tempting" an embattled President to try to exploit an international conflict to break out of his domestic difficulties. Of that lurking danger, the US leadership should be wary of.

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Triple talaq has no place in a secular India



BETWEEN THE LINES
KULDIP NAYAR

THE Supreme Court's judgment is harsh and unequivocal. There could be no compromise on the basics of the Indian Constitution, freedom to women and men to lead their lives as they wanted. I wish the Muslim community had accepted the bar on triple talaq, which goes against the spirit of the constitution. But it looks as if the fundamentalists have been having their way.

This was even the case with Shah Bano, a Muslim woman, where the Supreme Court intervened and fixed alimony in 1985 after a long legal battle. The Muslims did not accept the judgment and argued that the courts were not at liberty to interfere in matters

Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru. It was he who had introduced divorce in the Hindu religion for the first time. He was strongly opposed by Dr Rajendra Prasad, who was the chairman of the Constituent Assembly and widely respected. Nehru had his way because he controlled the government machinery.

Muslims have faced a similar challenge for decades. The triple talaq has no Quranic sanction, but it has been there for a long time. Some Muslim women challenged it in the Supreme Court which has said that gender equality should be considered in this regard. The government thought of issuing a questionnaire to find out the consensus, but refrained from doing so.

The Muslim Personal Law Board vehemently opposed this move. Incidentally, it has no woman member and continues to dictate terms without any consultation with women. This has been resented by

hailing from different parts of the country have protested and demanded that they should be consulted. The Narendra Modi government is reluctant to take any step lest it should be misunderstood. Things cannot be left at that point.

Parliament should step in first to debate on the issue in both Houses and then find out how the community, particularly its women, feel about this question. Political parties understandably want to maintain silence because of electoral considerations. In many states, including Uttar Pradesh which is the largest Hindi-speaking seats with 80 Lok Sabha seats, the Muslim community seems to be the king makers.

For instance, Samajwadi Party leader Mulayam Singh Yadav was able to garner Muslim votes since he was respected in the community who felt alienated from the Congress. In the recent assembly elections in UP, the anti-incumbency factor had come into play and the Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav was defeated despite having Azim Khan, then his cabinet minister, who was projected as the custodian of Muslims.

Congress Vice-President Rahul Gandhi, indiscreet in his speeches, has been trying to get Muslims on his side. But he doesn't sell generally among the people and it would probably be better for Sonia Gandhi herself to lead the party. There is no Italian-tag attached to her any longer. And she attracts the crowd in her own name more than her son does. This is a challenge for the Congress which has staked its future with Rahul but feels increasingly convinced that he does not go down well with the masses. In fact, his sister Priyanka Vadra has more of a popular face than him.

It is a shame that a secular democratic country has been living with a practice like triple talaq fearing the annoyance of the community. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi bungled by bringing in legislation to ensure a stipend for Muslim widows. It unnecessarily fuelled the anti-Babri Masjid agitation and during the PV Narasimha Rao government the mosque was demolished. The rest is history.

In the same way, triple talaq cannot continue because it goes against the grain of what is enshrined in the constitution. In fact, it is surprising that it has lasted so long despite the directive principles to have a common civil code. The successive governments since independence have evaded the question. The Modi government may also do the same. But this is not the solution. The triple talaq will have to go, sooner or later. The Supreme Court has indicated how the constitution should be interpreted in this regard.

The Muslim community is being misled by the fundamentalists. Unfortunately, politics has also come in. The ruling Bhartiya Janata Party has its eyes on the next general election in 2019. Be as it may, the atmosphere of pluralism should not be polluted. The Supreme Court or for that matter any Court would have no ground to interfere if the preamble of the constitution is followed: that is, secular and democratic polity.

PHOTO: AFP



The triple talaq has no Quranic sanction. Some Muslim women challenged it in the SC, which said that gender equality should be considered in this regard.

which relate to their personal law. According to the Muslim personal board, the issue of support to divorced women by means of maintenance and mahr is provided under the Shariat. But the Supreme Court did not accept the plea and fixed the amount for maintenance.

The triple talaq had no place in a secular society. Most Muslim countries in the world, including Pakistan and Bangladesh, have banned it. But the situation in India is such that a debate on the subject is not possible. Even a semblance of discussion is rejected outright as interference. The triple talaq continues to be invoked and the male dominance remains undiminished.

the women themselves but the Muslim Personal Law Board continues to follow a policy which doesn't even entertain the women's opinion. And thus, the fundamentalists continue to have their say.

The question is bound to come up before the Parliament some day because the different sections of the Muslim community and even others are agitated over the situation. There are social boycotts by most Muslim women. Muslim men, on the other hand, continue to dominate, even though they grant that the Prophet (PBUH) wanted both men and women to be treated as equal. However, when it comes to codifying this idea, the Board doesn't care.

How can a debate take place when the Muslim Personal Law Board is straightaway opposed to the questionnaire seeking people's opinion? Women

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