

Minister's comments on waterlogging

Compare with the best, not the worst

WE are quite taken aback by the remarks of the Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives Minister at a seminar where he has said that the waterlogging situation was much worse in expanding cities like Kolkata and Mumbai, compared to Dhaka. After going through a terrible bout of water logging following incessant rains in Dhaka and Chittagong recently, city dwellers of the two cities will not be amused by such unsympathetic words.

Why should the LGRD minister cite worst case scenarios in other cities? Why not give examples of cities that have addressed the waterlogging issue with efficiency and have actually solved it? Giving examples of how bad the situation is in other mega cities will hardly solve the problems in one's own cities. It goes without saying that every time there is a downpour in either Dhaka or Chittagong, main thoroughfares and alleys become completely inundated wreaking havoc on city life. The suffering of citizens is widely known especially through pictures and videos in the media as well as the low turnout in offices, schools and other institutions.

Aside from continuous rainfall, there are many manmade reasons for our waterlogging. Canals and streams have been indiscriminately encroached upon so there is nowhere for the excess water to flow into. Drainage systems have not been maintained properly or expanded to meet the needs of a growing city.

It is these manmade impediments that need to be removed to make sure that rains, which are inevitable in this region, do not paralyse the cities the way they do now. We happen to be living in Dhaka, not in Kolkata and Mumbai. And if we are going to compare ourselves with Kolkata and Mumbai what about all the other noteworthy characteristics of these cities such as a sane traffic system, basic security, efficient public transport and other urban facilities that those city dwellers take for granted? Why not compare with the best and emulate them?

DU on leakage allegation

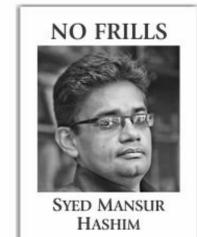
Denial can't cure an ill

A MIDST allegations of the question paper being leaked before the exams, the admission test results for Gha (D) unit of Dhaka University (DU) for 2017-2018 sessions has been published on Sunday. As many as 98,054 candidates applied for 1,610 seats for three groups, but 71,549 of them sat for the test last Friday. Only 10,264 of them have secured pass marks, which means an alarming 85% have failed.

Despite several newspapers including *The Daily Star* and television channels publishing the news of question leak with evidence, the DU authorities have kept denying the allegations without taking any steps to investigate the matter. Numerous activists have been participating in a protest demanding the formation of a probe committee for a thorough investigation of the question leak allegation. In spite of this, the authorities have stayed stubborn on their stance of denial.

Other than causing disappointment among people, what is alarming is the culture that this action is propagating. Education without morality is a menace in society. This situation depicts the lowest standard of morality in what is supposed to be the institution that functions as the moral high ground of the nation. If the questions were indeed not leaked, this should be made clear through an investigation. The stance of the DU authorities in this regard is truly upsetting. We hope they will reconsider their stand and look into investigating the matter.

A graveyard for ships and men



NO FRILLS

SYED MANSUR HASHIM

ACCORDING to a report published by this paper on October 22, "Bangladesh was the top buyer of scrapped ships in the world in the third quarter of 2017, followed by India," as

stated by the Brussels-based Shipbreaking Platform. "During the period, 50 scrapped ships were brought to Bangladesh and 44 to India, making South Asia the most preferred destination for scrapping old vessels, which is a hazardous practice for human health and environment."

Meanwhile, a total of 227 ships were taken apart globally, between July and September, while 124 (more than 50 percent) were broken up on the shores of South Asia. It doesn't matter where those ships come from or which parties are bringing them to our shores; what matters is the devastation they leave behind in terms of the human lives lost, the damage they cause to the health of our people and the environmental degradation we suffer from because of a lack of regulatory framework to govern ship-breaking in Bangladesh. The government does not have much data on the number of casualties in this sector nor do verifiable records exist. However, a joint study published in 2005 jointly by Greenpeace, FIDH titled 'End of Life Ships, The Human Cost of Breaking Ships', it was estimated from eyewitness testimonies of workers, that at least a thousand workers had died in the last few decades.

Those involved in the actual ship-breaking process, the workers, work mostly without protective gear and are exposed to all sorts of toxins. The primary reason why Bangladesh tops the charts is because there is much money to be made here at the cost of human lives. There is little or no investment by the breakers nor are there any concerted efforts, either by the government or companies involved in the trade, to contain pollutants and ensure safe working environments.

As put by the Shipbreaking Platform: "The prices offered for ships this third

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quarter have been high in South Asia, especially when compared to the figures of the first half of the year. Monsoon rains caused a shortage of local product being available to the domestic steel mills and have, therefore, driven prices for end-of-life ships up. Whilst a South Asian breaching yard can pay about USD 400/LDT (large stainless steel screws), Turkish yards are currently paying slightly less than the USD 250/LTD offered by Chinese yards."

No wonder obsolete ships come to die in countries like Bangladesh! We find that ship owners prefer to circumvent international waste laws and regulations laid out by EU Waste Shipment Regulation by falsely declaring that end-of-life ships are still in use when leaving port, which, in effect, allows them to send these ships for scrapping to countries like ours. Now if we look at the data, we find that some 1,250 ocean-going vessels reached the end of their service life in 2012 and were taken apart

cancer, mesothelioma and asbestosis. These fibrous materials not only affect the workers on site, rather they get carried home on clothing and in turn, affect family members too.

Heavy metals including mercury need to be disposed of properly, which is not done in Bangladesh. Mercury may cause serious damage to the nervous system. Lead is another metal that can cause permanent retardation, hearing impairment, loss of vision amongst other things. Mineral oil is serious business; it can cause explosions, and if it seeps into the ground or water bodies, it can kill fish and even humans who drink the contaminated water.

These are just some of the examples of hazardous materials that the environment and humans are exposed to when a ship is broken up without proper precautions. We are looking at not just the loss of aquatic species and livelihoods but long-term health

1995 which requires that each and every industry including shipbreaking must have an "Environmental Clearance Certificate" from the Department of Environment, Ministry of Forest and Environment.

The government had formulated Draft Rules on Ship Breaking and Hazardous Waste Management under the Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act 1995. As we fast-forward to 2011, the Ministry of Industry released the Ship Breaking and Recycling Rules which have not been adopted. Had it been adopted, then we could have had a one-stop service under the aegis of the Ministry of Industry that would have integrated all necessary procedures and permission while cooperating with other responsible departments and ministries. The Ship Recycling Board (SRB) would have been the authority for issuing the various certificates.

A writ petition was filed by Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers' Association (BELA) in 2003 and the High Court ruled that the government should ensure that



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PHOTO: STAR

to recover steel. Unfortunately, some 70 percent of all ships falling into this category were allowed to run aground on the shores of countries like Bangladesh, India and Pakistan where our ship-breaking industry went to work on them without giving two hoots about environmental concerns.

When we look at the workers' wages in our ship-breaking industry, it stands at about 2 Euros per day. That is a pittance compared to the phenomenal profits being made when a ship is broken up.

If we look at the toxic materials that come out of a dead ship being broken up—materials hazardous to both the workers and the environment—we begin to comprehend the gravity of the situation. Asbestos, for instance, is used in engine rooms for having thermal insulation and fire-resistant properties. While extracting asbestos, workers are exposed to fibres that can cause lung

hazards. In this backdrop, it is necessary to look at the regulatory framework (or lack thereof) that governs (or does not govern) the ship-breaking industry in Bangladesh.

We recognised the industry under the Labour Act 2006. The Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act 1995, Section D states that the owner and importer of ships as well as the users of shipbuilding yards must ensure that scrapping does not cause any pollution and/or health hazards through releasing hazardous wastes, while Section 9 goes on to say that in case of a discharge of excessive environmental pollutant, the person responsible and the person in charge of the place of occurrence shall take measures to control and mitigate the environmental pollution.

According to a research paper published in Marine Policy in 2014, there is a provision under the Environmental Law of

imported ships for the purpose of breaking up must be regulated in line with the requirements laid out in the Basel Convention 1989. Subsequently, BELA filed another case, BELA vs. Bangladesh (2006), and again the High Court ruled that the government should formulate appropriate rules to regulate the industry.

So, we have, in effect, passed six years since the government's formulation of Ship Breaking and Recycling Rules and nothing of note has happened. That merely goes to show precisely how much worth the authorities place on workers' safety and their health and the environment at large. Until we are willing to place health and safety and protecting the environment above fast profits, things will remain as they are.

Syed Mansur Hashim is Assistant Editor, *The Daily Star*.

Moderation, a wilting hallmark of Malaysia



CHONG LIP TECK

THROUGHOUT the months of September and October, the uproar in Malaysian society in the run-up to the 14th general elections that could be called

anytime now, has been energised by controversies such as one over a proposed beer festival, which at first seemed to have been cancelled due to religious sensitivity before other reasons, such as the risk of a terrorist attack and political factors, came to the fore.

Whether the beer festival that had its origins in Germany's Oktoberfest would eventually be held here is not, fundamentally, a question all Malaysians would seriously bother about. The real issue is the political will and execution power of our leaders, which the people will use as a yardstick to gauge the competency of the relevant authorities.

As if the beer fest was not enough to cause a big stir, the unresponsiveness and inaction on the part of the authorities over the Muslims-only launderette issue have frustrated many a Malaysian, forcing the royalty to step in and take charge.

Sultan Ibrahim of Johor was the first to censure the Muslims-only launderette in his state for undermining racial harmony, calling it an act of Talibanism. His Majesty also ordered immediate removal of the "Muslims only" sign in front of the shop.

In Perlis, the Raja Muda also banned a similar launderette in his state.

There were more senseless things to come. After the Johor Sultan spoke up, a Muslim preacher openly labelled Chinese Malaysians as "unclean" during a mosque

sermon while slamming the Sultan for banning Muslims-only launderette.

His fiery remarks created much controversy in the Malaysian society but sadly the relevant authorities, including the Islamic Development Department of Malaysia (Jakim) to which this preacher belongs, did nothing, until the Conference of Rulers issued a statement to back the Johor Sultan and Perlis Raja Muda in defence of moderation. That was when we began to see the home ministry,

whenever a controversial racial or religious issue pops up, these people are slow in defending the cause of moderation as well as the country's diversity.

The issues of beer festival and Muslims-only launderette have sadly reflected the submission to conservatism by the authorities, be it the Barisan Nasional or Pakatan Harapan governments. This was particularly visible in the Muslims-only launderette issue where the authorities only



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PHOTO: MANAN VATSYAYANA/JEP

police and Jakim take action and have the preacher arrested.

Moderation, tolerance and accommodation have all these years been an integral part of our day-to-day interactions. Malaysians irrespective of race and religion have been respecting and accepting one another all these years, while politicians and little Napoleons in our government departments keep sowing discord among the people.

Even though the government has repeatedly emphasised moderation,

came out with a remarkably toned-down response after the Johor Sultan had spoken up.

The stability of Malaysian society has stemmed from the harmony and unity among people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Muslims should take heed of the royalty's orders to manifest the virtues of moderation, tolerance and accommodation we have been practising for decades, and must constantly uphold the spirit of Rukunegara. As for non-Muslims, they must also embrace the

same guiding principles and exhibit the same virtues in practising their own religions and cultures.

Members of the public and non-governmental organisations alike have very high regards for the Malay Rulers' responsiveness, a reality our government leaders and officials cannot afford to ignore.

In any democratic country, an ineffective government machinery does not augur well for the continued progress

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of society. And our hard-earned racial harmony and diversity could be compromised if our leaders continue to keep mum over the excessive acts of religious extremists or if ill-intentioned politicians continue to sow discord among the people.

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This is a series of columns on global affairs written by top editors and columnists from members of the Asia News Network and published in newspapers and websites across the region.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Can we be kinder to our children?

Yesterday, a girl from my college committed suicide after having failed to get herself admitted to a university or even a national university affiliated college for higher education. The incident is extremely sad and is another reminder of the unhealthy rat race our students have to participate in, in their academic life.

There is no end to this competition. Even young children need to face the challenge of outsmarting others to make their parents happy.

The expectations of our parents are just weighing children down, which they fail to understand. Our expectations and attitude have pushed them so far as to make them feel ashamed if they are unable to get admission into a good institution.

Can't we be a little kinder to our children and provide them with a bit of respite, away from the harshness of unhealthy challenges and competitions?

Ashek Sarker, *Chhagalnaiya Government College, Feni*

Chittagong-Sylhet flight needed

Nowadays, air passengers are experiencing a congenial atmosphere because many private airlines offer better services with their domestic and international flights. Day by day, the number of air passengers is increasing. People want to journey in comfort. This is why a good number of air passengers avail opportunities to travel from Dhaka to different places of the country, and vice versa. However, it's a pity that there is no flight from Chittagong to Sylhet.

I think private airlines should come forward and introduce Chittagong-Sylhet-Chittagong flight, as there is much demand there.

Md Saqueel Hussain, *By email*