

Dhaka needs its wetlands

Realtors' demands ludicrous

GOING against everything we have heard from experts about the importance of preserving and reclaiming Dhaka's wetlands, realtors at a meeting with Rajuk on Wednesday seem to have found a new solution. According to them, Dhaka has no need for its wetlands—one individual went so far as to say that these water bodies only serve to increase the mosquito population. It cannot be lost to anyone that reclamation of these water bodies which would go a long way in solving waterlogging would hurt the unethical business practices that realtors have followed over the years.

Urban development experts have pointed out that eastern Dhaka was once defined by its aqua lands. Over the years, these areas which served as the city's natural drainage networks were turned into sand. Illegal encroachment of these bodies coupled with impunity are the reasons we are where we are today. This is despite the fact that the DAP and the Dhaka's master plan prohibit development of housing projects in such water bodies and flood flow zones.

We have seen little action from the authorities to reclaim the 2,500 acres of flood flow zones and agricultural land from the grip of illegal property developers as the DAP suggests. Now, the realtors have demanded that Rajuk should not develop a new plan that "it cannot implement." In effect, they are asking the authorities to forget about the water bodies that have been encroached and move on.

It is mainly due to opposition from realtors that Rajuk has failed to reclaim Dhaka's water bodies. Thankfully, the Rajuk chairman has responded by saying that Dhaka's officially recorded rivers, canals and water bodies would be conserved at any cost. We hope that the body acts on its laudable words. We have seen this year how greed-fuelled development disregarding environmental concerns can turn this city unlivable. It would be devastating to give it legitimacy as the realtors have demanded.

Change of guards at SIBL

Why the haste and violation of rules?

SOCIAL Islami Bank Ltd.'s (SIBL) top brass resignations have left a bitter taste in the banking sector. We are dumbstruck by the manner in which resignations submitted by the bank's top three members of senior management, including the chairman, were accepted by the central bank in only a few hours after submission. It is reported that the central bank worked at record speed to accept the resignations and issue no-objection certificates (NOC) which is in contravention of a BB circular (issued on December 23, 2014) that states that if the chief executive officer of a banking institution wishes to relieve himself of his responsibilities, he or she must give the board at least a one-month notice, along with reasons for resignation, that are supposed to be verified by BB.

It would seem that rules do not apply to certain banks. Because we find that BB went one step further and approved the appointment of the new managing director and issued a NOC on the same day. We marvel at the level of efficiency with which the central bank is operating these days! It seems that the central bank has given in to pressure from the new majority shareholder of the bank. If we are to take this as the new normal in our country, where banking rules and regulations are made to be broken, then there is little hope of ensuring good financial governance in the sector.

Making Myanmar behave

A worthwhile mission

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

WHEN levers and counter-levers pull away in opposite directions the object of delivering change is stuck on the pulley, as it were. This is understandable as a scientific concept. But what

is so eerily unethical is the oxygen of support Myanmar not only receives from a handful of countries, but is also pumped up by. No wonder it treats rule-based civility with a barbarian disdain. Thanks to the lurking prospect of one veto outweighing all the rest in the UN Security Council, even other veto powers, Myanmar is dictating terms to a stupefied world.

During the critical final phase of our Liberation War, the then Soviet Union had vetoed ceasefire resolution in the UNSC providing impetus to the speedy end of the war and consequent birth of Bangladesh. Not only that, the former Soviet Union, whose glory Putin tries to imbibe, became a tower of strength for India-Mukti Bahini joint command's success through the rampart of the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation signed in August 1971.

Beijing's imposition of sanctions at long last on North Korea, a close ally, for its unceasing tests of long-range ballistic missiles after the matter had come to a head conjured up a possibility that Beijing might change its mind about Myanmar.

How things change! It is difficult to believe today that the same country is up to stonewalling a tough resolution against Myanmar by playing a veto card in an unjust cause! Vasily Nebenzia, the Russian ambassador to the UN, warned that "excessive pressure" on Myanmar "could only aggravate the situation in the country and around it."

A Christian Science Monitor report in late September stated, "The US and others call for a strong stance against



Rohingya refugees reaching for food aid at a refugee camp in Ukhiya near the Bangladesh-Myanmar border.

PHOTO: AFP

Myanmar military for their part in Rohingya crisis. But China and Russia urge the UNSC to work with Myanmar authorities instead of against them."

Yet, the Russian ambassador to the UN, and the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, both warned (in contrast to China) that the Rohingya crisis could spread spilling over to central Rakhine where an additional 250,000 Muslims might face displacement.

Austin Ramzy, writing for the New York Times on September 18, had lamented, "Despite international condemnation of Myanmar's campaign of violence against the Rohingya people, there have been few calls for a return to the sort of sanctions that were long a part of the country's relationship with the West."

One feels that while thanking the USA, EU, and the western world in general for their generous support including placing travel ban on Myanmar generals, we must not lose sight of the fact that they are far from re-imposing some of the earlier sanctions on Myanmar as a foretaste of things to come if it failed to behave.

It is little consolation that the ethnic cleansing issue has limbered up from closed door session to an open discussion phase at the Security Council with a mark of urgency attached to it. Up to that point, China and Russia kept com-

pany with the rest to have an "open discussion" for a moment raising a sliver of hope that maybe China is toying with a prospect of toughening its stance on Myanmar down the line. After all, an intensely close neighbour (Chinese universities seriously run Burmese language courses) is obliged to rap Burma's knuckles without causing undue offense.

Beijing's imposition of sanctions at long last on North Korea, a close ally, for its unceasing tests of long-range ballistic missiles after the matter had come to a head conjured up a possibility that Beijing might change its mind about Myanmar. Although the two situations are not quite analogous, the dispossessed Rohingyas making for more than a million refugees are a ticking time bomb. Should it explode, its spill-overs are likely to destabilise the region.

But China had blocked an effort by Egypt to add language calling for Rohingya refugees to be granted the right to return to Myanmar.

Sun Guoxiang, China's Special Envoy of Asian Affairs, thought that Myanmar was more committed than ever before to take back the Rohingyas (as if they are doing us a favour after having themselves created the situation!).

There is a contradiction in China's latest posturing. The Chinese special

envoy of Asian affairs, on the one hand, puts emphasis on bilateral talks to resolve the crisis; on the other, he says "Both Bangladesh and Myanmar are their (China's) friends. They want to resolve the crisis in a peaceful way by working with two friends." If that be the case, should we not try to cash in on the glimmer of a prospect for a Chinese intercession in bringing the parties together for a sustainable resolution of the double-edged sword of a problem—on-going, off-going forced exodus and diffident repatriation of the stateless Rohingyas?

Prospective initiatives include convening a special session of the UNHCR Council in Geneva in January; appointment of a special advisor to the UN secretary general following the retirement of India's Vijay Nambiar; and passing of a special resolution at the UN Third Committee dealing with social, humanitarian and cultural concerns.

India, China, Russia and Japan have very strong stakes in Bangladesh. BCIM corridor and One-Road-One-Belt (OROB) can be on the cusp of new catalysis underpinned by sustained Track-ii diplomacy.

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PROJECT SYNDICATE

Publicising the plight of journalists



LEON WILLEMS

EVERY five days, on average, somewhere in the world, a journalist is murdered for being a journalist. Nine out of ten times, no one is prosecuted, creating an atmosphere of impunity that extends beyond death threats or violence. Imprisonment of journalists is at an all-time high, and members of the press routinely suffer harassment and intimidation while on assignment. Today, journalism is one of the most dangerous professions anywhere.

One way to address this state of affairs is by talking about it. Three recent examples highlight the risks journalists take to report the news, and underscore why publicising their plight is the only way to bring about change.

Consider Maria Ressa, CEO of Rappler.com, an online news network based in the Philippines. Since founding

Rappler in 2012, Ressa's website has become an invaluable source of information about the extrajudicial killings linked to President Rodrigo Duterte's "war on drugs." For her enterprising reporting, Ressa has received more than 80 death threats in September alone. Many of these warnings have come from anonymous bloggers, with IP addresses traceable to the president's associates.

Then there is the case of William Ntege, a journalist who reported on recent protests against Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni's decision to run in the next presidential election, despite constitutional prohibitions preventing him from doing so. Ntege was severely beaten by police for his coverage, and held in jail for more than ten days.

Finally, there is the erosion of press freedoms in Myanmar. A new clause written into the country's media law allows citizens to file a lawsuit if they have a complaint with an article or news item, even if the reporting does not directly mention them. This legal provision – in sharp contrast to international norms –

has led to 61 cases filed against journalists since February 2016, when Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy came to power.

Infringements of press freedom like these have become common tactics for autocratic regimes, from Turkey to Russia and beyond. But it is not only despots and strongmen who have declared war on the press. In Colombia and Mexico, hundreds of journalists have been placed under armed guard to protect them from criminal syndicates. Yet this hasn't stopped journalists across Latin America from leaving the profession in droves. A favourite strategy of Mexican drug gangs seeking to stay out of the headlines is to threaten investigative journalists' children. No wonder the media's ranks are shrinking.

Part of the reason most consumers of news do not know these stories is that organisations like mine have long worked to ensure that journalists never become the story. Press freedom groups have typically operated under the assumption that the best way to protect fact-based, investigative journalism is to shield the

storyteller from violence. And, like most journalists, we have opted to do our jobs quietly, rather than burdening readers and viewers with how dangerous the profession has become. But it is time to change our approach, and make a point of highlighting the hazards.

For example, Ntege was released only after considerable effort by a team of lawyers retained by Reporters Respond, the Free Press Unlimited emergency fund for journalist safety. Since the fund's inception in 2011, it has helped dozens of journalists around the world, including, most recently, a group of reporters fleeing mob violence in Burundi. And a huge number of organisations aid journalists in distress in the Middle East, in Eastern Europe, and elsewhere. These stories behind the news must be told.

Of course, telling these tales is just the beginning. Press freedom advocates must also deliver journalists a stronger, more coordinated framework for their protection and safety. To that end, my organisation is engaging with other global entities to strengthen the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity. We have also begun holding regular meetings with other media freedom groups to devise a path forward. And, we have started working to ensure that media protections are backed up by legislation and enforcement. Journalists will need brave prosecutors and judges to hold attackers accountable if impunity is to end.

But the most important changes must come from within the media industry itself. Because journalists' safety directly affects news organisations' employees, freelancers, and audiences, these organisations should report on the topic. With attacks on the press increasing, the old approach – pridesilence – no longer makes sense. If the journalists use their platforms to inform the world of the dangers they and their colleagues face, the world will have to listen.

Violence against journalists has historically been an issue that has remained behind the headlines. On November 2, the world recognised the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists. Let's commit to making these stories front-page news now.

Leon Willems is Director of Free Press Unlimited. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2017. www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to The Daily Star)



Indian activists take part in a protest rally against the killing of Indian journalist Gauri Lankesh.

PHOTO: AFP

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Can DU revive its lost glory?

The shameful incident of a senior teacher at Dhaka University assaulting his colleague is yet another reminder of how ignoble the institution has become. Newspaper reports say that they both belong to the pro-ruling party teachers' forum at the university.

In recent months, students and teachers of the university have caused a number of controversies. DU student buses, for example, were repeatedly found to be running on the wrong side of road, defying traffic rules.

Its previous vice-chancellor has been accused of crude favouritism while recruiting university teachers. And then when a group of students demanded that DUCSU elections be held before convening the senate meeting to appoint a new VC, another group of teachers and students physically assaulted the protesters. A few days ago, a number of DU teachers were accused of plagiarism.

Dhaka University is the most prestigious university in the country, yet its teachers seem to focus less on research and academic work and more on political activities.

In order to revive the former glory of this university, the authorities must restore the integrity of the faculty members. To do so, only the candidates with sizable research portfolio and genuine interest in pursuing their research agenda should be appointed as teachers.

M Nabil, By email