

State must protect minorities from zealots

Arrest the culprits without delay

THE attack on four houses of Ahmadiyya Muslims by supporters of three Islamist organisations in Ahmednagar village of Panchagarh Sadar upazila on February 12 reminds us, once again, that the scourge of communalism is very much present in our society. Their demand that Ahmadiyyas be declared non-Muslim reminds us of the plight of this small Shia sect in another Muslim country. Although we welcome the deployment of police and BGB units in the village, there is no question of giving in to demands of religious zealots.

The vandalism of property is a direct message to members of this community that they are not safe on Bangladeshi soil. They are citizens of the country, and as such, enjoy the protection of the State. While deploying security forces in the vicinity may give these vulnerable people momentary reprieve from further violence, it does not solve the problem. We would like to know precisely how these so-called Islamist organisations can challenge the very fabric of communal harmony that is synonymous with our way of life and why the State cannot ban these outfits and arrest those responsible for the attack.

We have witnessed the ugly head of communal forces over the years, ranging from the desecration of Buddhist holy sites in Ramu to the massacre of innocents in the Holey Artisan Café attack in 2016. There is no question of giving in to demands of religious extremists and the latest arson attack must be shown the same zero-tolerance that has been the government's policy in dealing with terrorist acts.

Can our war on drugs be won?

We should take lessons from other countries

DUE to the law enforcement agencies' heightened vigilance on yaba trafficking, smugglers and peddlers are now going to great lengths to smuggle yaba across the country. As reported by this newspaper, traffickers are now using air routes. This certainly poses a new challenge to the law enforcement agencies' efforts to contain the drug problem because our airports lack the logistical resources to detect drugs being trafficked. This new trend of drug trafficking shows why measures so far taken to combat it may not work fully.

In terms of law enforcement measures, the authorities should focus on targeting kingpins that control the business. Unfortunately, while many traders or peddlers might have been targeted in the anti-drug drive, few known bigwigs have so far been detained or prosecuted.

As numerous experiences across the world show, the supply of drugs will always find a way as long as there's sufficient demand. Tough measures may disrupt the supply chain for some time, but the traffickers almost always can circumvent obstacles. And, it's really difficult for law enforcers to devise new combative strategies to cope with drug traffickers' "innovative" tactics.

Therefore, the authorities concerned should launch intensive awareness-raising campaigns. Young people must be made aware of the dangerous consequences that come with addiction to drugs such as yaba.

Moreover, as experienced by other countries that have attempted to curb drug addiction, better results can be attained if the problem is viewed as a public health issue. More resources should be allocated to addiction treatment and rehabilitation. Only a combination of anti-drug campaign, public health policies and law enforcement measures can make a long-lasting effect when it comes to combating the drug problem.

Rivers need more than a legal status



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

RIVERS are no longer just rivers bound only by the laws of nature. The High Court has recently given a verdict awarding the status of "living entities" to the country's

rivers in a bid to protect them and raise awareness of their importance. By any measure, this is a landmark judgement coming out of the court, a ringing endorsement of the fact that our rivers are in dire need of help. For the ordinary citizens, those caught between complicit spectatorship and dismay when it comes to the destruction of our rivers, it also offers a rare glimmer of hope. While the conferring of a legal status is a symbolic gesture, the High Court has also offered a realistic plan of action. It sought to strengthen the National River Protection Commission, which it assigned as the "legal guardian" of all rivers in the country, outlined a mechanism to implement their "rights" and also gave detailed instructions for several government agencies to that effect.

So, what does it mean for rivers and their associated natural elements to have rights? Is a legal status enough to save our rivers? Since the verdict was given on February 3, there has been an ongoing debate about how effective it will be. Some people are less enthusiastic than others, and for good reasons. It's hard to believe a single move, however revolutionary, can alone bring change. Recall the last notable HC verdict on rivers—a ruling in 2009 about the demarcation of four rivers surrounding Dhaka—which was met with utter neglect, and nothing came of it eventually. But because of the groundbreaking nature of its content, the latest verdict will at least serve as a point of reference for evaluating all future endeavours in this regard, and may set in motion a groundswell of popular support for rivers which will embolden the activists.

But in all fairness, there is a limit to what a court can and cannot do. It cannot, for example, transform a society that takes rivers for granted, or radically alter how the "system" works, or get the policymakers to see eye to eye with the experts on pressing environmental concerns, or dismantle the industrial-political complex that profits from riverbank encroachment.

Rivers run through our country like veins run through the human body. This is hardly comforting when you consider that some of our rivers are already dead, some slowly approaching extinction. Like clots



PHOTO: STAR

that form in our veins and cause life-threatening blockages, our rivers too are facing life-threatening challenges in the form of plastic litter, discarded packaging and various household and industrial wastes that stack up on their shores, choking and scarring them until they are robbed of their natural character; and then, you have the double whammy of sand extraction and what is popularly known as "river grabbing". The High Court's verdict is significant as it envisages a future for rivers shielded from all these manmade hazards, but any lingering doubt about its success will owe its existence partly to the challenge of clearing up this gargantuan mess that we've made over many years—and partly to the inflexible nature of our approach to rivers.

Md Khalequzzaman, a professor of geology at The Khalequzzaman University, USA, posits that it will require more than a court order to undo all the damage that has been done to our rivers already. In an article published by *The Daily Star* recently, he put up a list of things-to-do for the verdict to bear fruit. Everyone has a part in it: the parliament, politicians, citizens, industries, the implementing agencies. It will take "a concerted effort and a commitment from everyone" for the verdict to be implemented, he said, outlining his view of what possible role each can play and the changes that will be required.

For the government, a major challenge will be to address the seismic fault lines

within its existing river policy to make it compatible with the High Court's vision for rivers. A recent interview of two well-known environmental activists by *The Daily Star's* online Bangla site highlighted several such fault lines, including the drive against riverbank encroachment. The drive, said architect Iqbal Habib, is usually done without any conservation plan for the post-eviction period. "An unplanned drive is actually harmful and counterproductive," he said, explaining that often a vacated place is reoccupied and illegal structures crop up again as soon as the drive is over. The worst part is that those in charge of the drive have demonstrably little knowledge of how to preserve riverbanks and keep them open and accessible and free of all structures. "It is difficult to assume that the same persons who have frustrated us in the past will not do the same in the future."

Dr Abdul Matin, general secretary of Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (Bapa), believes the government's river policy is riddled with contradictions. "We've often noted contradictions in the government's actions. The government's approach to rivers is not correct; it doesn't fit with that of environmentalists. The government is principally of the view that it is okay for it to interfere in rivers as part of its development work or as a means of flood control," he said. He thinks a river policy should be based on scientific considerations. In this connection, he drew attention to the fact that Bangladesh didn't

ratify the 1997 UN Watercourses Convention which is widely regarded as an important document on river use and conservation and a guideline for establishing laws governing waters.

"The Bangladesh government has been trapped in the labyrinth of its own misguided policy because of its refusal to recognise and abide by the UN convention. All its projects are being undertaken based on this wrong policy. Sometimes illegal structures on river banks are demolished, but at the same time, government structures [and even private ones] built inside rivers are spared. It symbolises an inconsistency within the government caused by its own policy blunder," Dr Matin said.

Clearly, some of our laws and plans will need a radical revision and realignment in light of the vision set by the High Court. The society has to transform itself, too, to be truly worthy of its rivers, to co-exist, not to coerce into submission or destroy. If it feels like a civilisational wakeup call, it is because the situation is that much dire. But the bigger challenge right now will be to implement the court verdict, directive by directive, as no half-measures and quick fixes—which usually follow court verdicts of this nature—will be enough. The court has done its part to protect our rivers. The spotlight is now on the administration.

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Creating a new economic zone for apparel

Things we should keep in mind for it to work out in the long run



MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

THE signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) early last year between the BGMEA and the Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority (BEZA) was, quite rightly, much applauded

by the national press. Work on the 500-acre zone, dedicated for the industry in Mirsarai, is underway, promising to attract local and international investments and generate some 150,000 new jobs over the next two years.

This initiative, and others like it, should be heartily encouraged by the government and the ready-made garment (RMG) industry of Bangladesh as a whole. Yet, we need to ensure that we maximise the potential of these endeavours, their appeal to international customers and the future success of this and other planned economic zones.

It goes without saying that the zone needs to have access to a guaranteed, uninterrupted supply of power and other utilities including gas, water, and construction of the site needs to follow the highest possible international standard. It should be taken as read that any company taking over a plot within the zone must abide by the highest ethical norms and environmental standards.

Over and above these fundamental principles, time is also ripe to consider facilities that can be developed and offered to all residents of the zone ensuring that the construction of the special economic zone at Mirsarai is future-proofed to increase its appeal to investors and international apparel buyers alike.

Infrastructure in and around the facility needs to be carefully planned. We are all well aware of the problems regarding the road network in Bangladesh. With the building of the new zone, we need to ensure that it is serviced by the best possible multi-modal transport network. That is, both in the site and also to and from the zone, in particular to key transport and port facilities.

Alongside the supply of the regular facilities, when building the zone, we also must seize the opportunity to develop the entire zone, the facilities and plants as at

least a carbon-neutral place. There is the potential to build a centralised solar powered supply centre which could supply, at the very least, a percentage of the electricity used by the zone.

More ambitious perhaps, but given the zone's location, an approach worth considering, is the opportunity to utilise the nearby tidal system and establish a hydro power source, or even introduction of a more adventurous wind-power facility.

The RMG industry has an ill-fame for its pollution of water. As we are blessed by an abundance of natural rainwater, a zone-wide integrated rainwater harvesting system can be integrated into the development of the zone and construction of buildings within the zone—so that the water feeds into a central reservoir that

Furthermore, centralised effluent disposal would also increase the appeal of the entire zone to the international crowd. A similar approach calls for disposal of all garbage out of the zone in the most responsible manner.

Another aspect that should attract our target audience is the establishment of a centralised research and development facility, servicing the needs of the zone's RMG community. Styled as the R&D and Innovation centre, it would offer a wide spectrum of services covering the whole gamut of the zone's RMG companies' services, from fabric development, process engineering, managerial practices to garment design, garment construction and garment processing. The centre would need to be equipped with state-of-the-art facilities and be able to offer a

embrace technology from top-to-toe in the garment cycle, i.e. from fabric development, concept design, through to cutting and sewing technology, adoption of technology-aided washing and finishing machinery, to purchasing and delivery systems, etc. All of these will improve our efficiency and competitiveness in terms of price, will greatly improve the overall quality of products being made and will result in a reduction in lead-times to customers.

By investigating every possible angle during the construction of the zone, we have the opportunity to establish a standalone RMG facility that the world should envy. As a humble manufacturer, I would plea the government to not only encourage quality and responsible investments in the zone, but also to explore and implement the latest technologically-enhanced, environmentally-sound, sustainable practices during the construction process of the zone and the factories.

As the location is quite far from the city, it would be good to have a place like "Investors' Club" with multiple restaurants so there is competition as well as a wide range of choices. Hotels, residential apartments and service apartments need to be built so that people who will invest in this zone, especially foreigners, can find accommodation easily. And a few good hotels would also mean essential entertainment facilities such as gym, sports complex, etc.

The final aspect of the establishment of the economic zone I would like to highlight is the public relations potential that this enterprise offers. We will have the opportunity to promote this initiative to the global audience who are still, unfortunately, overly sceptical or, at least, cautious when considering Bangladesh as a source for the production of garments.

The establishment of the new economic zone at Mirsarai is indeed a great initiative, offering our RMG industry the opportunity to present itself in a new light to our customers and to show the world that Bangladesh is a world-leading garment resource to be reckoned with.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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A city suffering from unplanned urbanisation

Kishoreganj, my native town, is undergoing a massive urbanisation process. Several multi-storied buildings are being constructed, for which a large amount of construction material is needed. For storing sand, bricks, stones or rods, landlords are using adjacent footpaths, causing trouble for pedestrians.

The roads across the town are already narrow, and this practice makes them even narrower. The dust from sand and bricks engulf and pollute the air.

The local administration and municipal authorities are well aware of the problem, but they are yet to take any meaningful actions. If the problem persists, the plight of the local residents will exacerbate. It is high time the authorities took measures against it.

Shajib Rahman, By e-mail



Work on the 500-acre zone, dedicated for the industry in Mirsarai, is underway, promising to attract local and international investments and generate some 150,000 new jobs.

could be used by all of the facilities within the area.

Alongside rainwater harvesting, we also need to get it right that the RMG factories do not contribute to the pollution of water, e.g. through effluents produced through processing of yarns, dyeing of fabrics or laundering of garments. The establishment of a centralised effluent treatment plant (ETP) servicing the whole zone would alleviate the financial burden passed on to individual manufacturers who otherwise should be responsible for building their own ETPs.

one-stop shop for customers' development requirements, offering the opportunity to develop products in the most environmentally and sustainably responsive manner.

For the skill development of the new and non-technical workers, a skill development and training centre should also be established.

Hand-in-hand with the centres there is the need for a sound technology base across the entire zone. Technology will play a significant role in the RMG sector in the years to come; and we need to