

The Daily Star

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Why can't we do river excavation right?

Govt must revise Pashur excavation project

HERE seems to be no end to instances of failed or half-baked river excavation in the country. The newest report on this issue highlights the situation in Banishanta union of Khulna's Dacope upazila, where Mongla port authorities are planning to dump sand and soil (excavated from the Pashur River) onto over 300 acres of cropland. For authorities to even consider such a harmful move is reprehensible. This particular excavation project was approved by the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ecnec) on January 28, 2020. Already, port authorities have taken over 700 acres of land in the Chila area of Bagerhat district by dumping sand on it. And, according to the chairman of Banishanta Union Parishad, Mongla port police grounded red flags and signboards announcing their illegal occupation of the area's land on July 27. If this project is allowed to reach completion, it will ruin the livelihoods and cause displacement of thousands of people.

The project's original deadline was in June, but as is the case with most public projects, it is far from completion. Though in this instance, this may be a positive, given that it will allow authorities to take the farmers' protest into consideration and rethink the project altogether. Although Mongla Port authorities claim that the compensation from the government to affected locals - Tk 2 lakh per acre in 10 years - we have to agree with the farmers who say it is no match to the at least Tk 5 lakh they earn just by selling the crops they grow on the lands. This project is also concerning from an environmental perspective, as it would include filling up of land within 10km of the Sundarbans, which is prohibited as per a court directive.

Despite river excavation being a routine work in Bangladesh, our authorities often do it wrong. In June, we wrote about the Bhadra river in Khulna's Dumuria upazila, which was re-excavated by the Water Development Board (WDB) with a whopping Tk 46.25 crore only two years back, but became filled up again as the excavated earth fell from the river bank back into the river. Last May, another report detailed how the Charalkantha River in Nilphamari shrunk to a mere channel in many places, as the soil excavated from it in 2020 made it back to the river.

The government must investigate claims by locals that the Mongla port authorities are planning to dump sand onto croplands in Banishanta union despite there being alternatives. Such protests by economically disadvantaged citizens must be taken seriously, especially since it concerns the very source of income they depend on. River excavation work, and any public project, must be conducted while keeping in mind the betterment of citizens' lives - not by causing them suffering.

BCL has become a total menace

Ruling party must take responsibility for its student activists' degeneracy

THE audacity shown by some Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) activists to allegedly force a resident student of Dhaka University's Haji Mohammad Mohsin Hall to leave his dormitory over a Facebook post criticising the recent fuel price hike is simply astonishing. But unfortunately, cases like this have become a common phenomenon at our public universities, where ruling party activists have become a menace. We are continually reminded by media reports how BCL activists have all but taken over the functioning of public universities, continually obstructing educational activities, harassing, torturing and, in worst cases, murdering fellow students over the most trivial of matters, such as expressing an opinion that differs from the party line. And while all these happen, top-officials of the ruling party who are so eager to admonish the public - that they are meant to serve - for criticising government policies, barely make a peep.

But it is their silence that speaks volumes. Over the years, the ruling party has provided immense leeway to its student activists, despite their repeated involvement in violent, uncivilised, and criminal activities. And this leeway, as well as direct pressure sometimes, has led to a situation where university administrations, law enforcers, and others, are also reluctant to pursue any action against BCL members involved in criminal behaviour - for fear of reprisal.

Only this week, a Rajshahi University student accused the BCL general secretary of the Matihar Hall unit of beating him up after confining him to a room. Despite the national outrage that followed after a similar incident led to the murder of Buet student Abrar Fahad, it seems that some BCL activists are the only ones who did not get the memo that such behaviour is not, in any way, acceptable in a civilised society. Earlier this month, we saw how BCL members shut down educational activities at Chattogram University for their own petty gains. A few days later, we saw two BCL activists who were suspended by the CU authorities on July 25 for one year for harassing some female students on the campus, sit for the second-year semester final examination.

All these - and many more similar incidents - clearly show that it is not that the BCL has "a few bad apples" problem. It has a "violence and criminal behaviour" problem. And that has now reached its zenith due to the privileges that the ruling party has given it.

The ruling party may have given the BCL such leeway thinking that BCL's thuggery may help the party maintain its grasp on power. But BCL excesses have reached a point where its activists are doing the party much more harm than whatever temporary gain it thinks it's getting. Therefore, it is time for the ruling party to have a serious reflection on how it will stop the nuisance that it has let loose.

We call on the DU authorities to immediately allow the student who was forced out by BCL activists to return to his dormitory, and to seriously punish the offenders.

Who is responsible for Abdul Momen?



Golam Mortoza is the editor of The Daily Star Bangla.

GOLAM MORTOZA

THE government does not want to take responsibility for his public statements. Nor does the ruling party.

Yes, I am talking about our foreign minister, Dr AK Abdul Momen.

Last week, during an event in Chattogram, Dr Momen said he had "requested" India to do "whatever necessary in order to keep Sheikh Hasina in power."

When asked about it, Awami League General Secretary and Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader said, "It may be someone's personal view. It is neither the government's view, nor the party's."

Awami League Presidium Member Abdur Rahman said since the foreign minister was "not a party member," there was no question of the party being embarrassed by his statements.

Interestingly, Dr Momen is an adviser to the Sylhet district unit of Awami League, and he is also a member of the party's Sylhet metropolitan unit. Still, he is not a part of the ruling party?

Whom, then, is the foreign minister affiliated with? Who will be held responsible for his words and actions? Are Obaidul Quader and Abdur Rahman's comments representing the government and the ruling Awami League, or are those their personal views too?

Discussing Bangladesh's internal political situations with foreigners is nothing new. Both the Awami League and BNP have done it on several occasions - usually when they were the opposition.

Recently, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet paid an official visit to Bangladesh, during which she spoke to government high-ups, civil society members, human rights workers, and the BNP too. At that time, Quader said, "Lobbying for foreigners would not bear any fruit. Foreigners or the UN cannot probe our internal issues." The information minister echoed him.

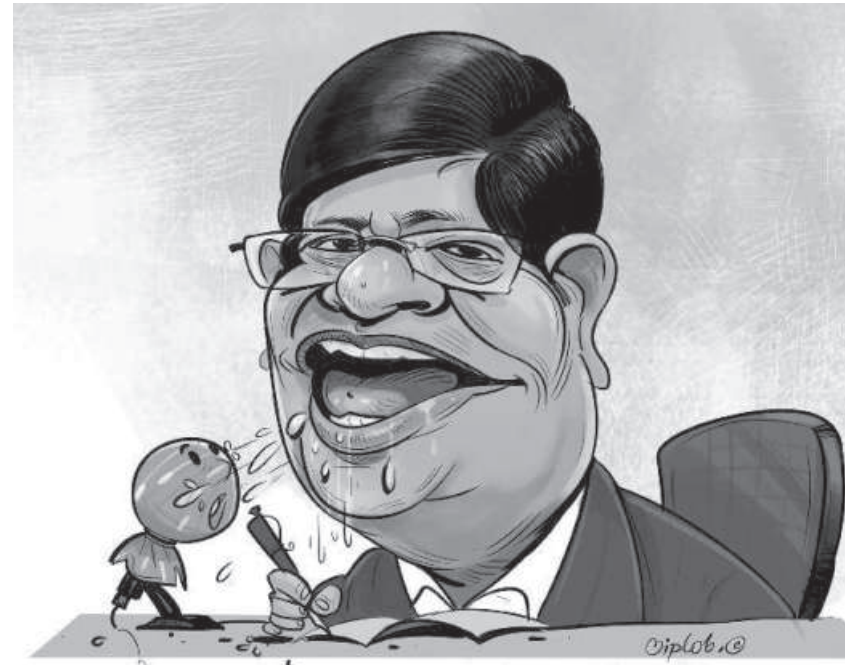
This is exactly when Momen came under the spotlight, by stating to the public what he'd done during his India visit.

Why did Momen visit India? He went to India as the foreign minister of Bangladesh to discuss certain matters. He received due diplomatic

protocols there. He attended meetings and discussed issues with India's ruling party members, ministers, chief ministers and bureaucrats. All of these were state-level meetings between the two countries.

Abdul Momen did not visit India as an individual. He did so as a representative of the Bangladesh government. The cost of his travels was entirely borne by Bangladeshi taxpayers. How, then, can this visit or what he did or say during this visit be considered personal?

We Bangladeshis have self-respect. Bangladesh is a small country, but it's independent and sovereign. Our freedom came at a very high cost.



How can the sitting foreign minister of that sovereign country make such a "personal" request to another country's leaders? Doesn't it break the oath he took when he was sworn in as a minister of the Bangladesh government? Doesn't it hurt the self-respect of the people whom he vowed to serve? Doesn't it hurt the self-respect of Obaidul Quader, or the government?

There are two ways of seeing this: either he didn't realise the implications of what he was saying, or he knew what it meant to make such a statement.

If the first scenario is true, that

a country's foreign minister would speak like that during an official visit to another country without understanding the implications cannot be acceptable. If that is the case, his qualifications, skills and intellectual level come under question.

But if the second scenario is true, then the Bangladeshi people were humiliated. Statements like this are what damage the country's "image," which our government is concerned about, the most.

Let's revisit some of Dr Momen's past statements as Bangladesh's foreign minister. He once compared the relationship between Bangladesh and India with that of a husband and wife. That a foreign minister of a country would describe two nations' relationship in such away is probably unprecedented in history. This by no means is diplomatic lingo, nor is it the language of politics in general.

India is Bangladesh's neighbour and ally. We must maintain good relations with India. But that doesn't mean we have to ask them to ensure

them to the polls."

The general public understands that the incumbent government has India's support. Since Bangladesh helped India with the situation in the Seven Sisters states, the latter has a high level of confidence in the Awami League. It is expected that Bangladesh will continue to have a good relation with India based on confidence and trust.

But a perception has formed in the Bangladeshi people's minds that India plays a critical role in determining who stays in power in Bangladesh. Momen's statement has made that perception only stronger. It may not be comforting for India either.

Last year, the US imposed sanctions on the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) and some of its officers. It is only natural that Bangladesh will try to have these sanctions lifted. Bangladesh should have taken punitive action against the allegations of human rights violation, for which the sanctions were imposed. We should have ensured that there are no more violations of human rights - that Rab is not involved in such violations.

Instead, we saw the incidents of "crossfire" virtually stopping. The US also brought allegations of enforced disappearances and fraudulent cases. There has been no visible change regarding those either. The Bangladesh government prioritised seeking India's help in this regard over bringing in the much-needed fundamental changes. Foreign Minister Abdul Momen said Bangladesh had requested India to help remove the sanctions, and India was lobbying the US for Bangladesh.

The problem is Bangladesh's, and Momen is Bangladesh's foreign minister. But he requested India to help with removing the US sanctions. Of course, we want the sanctions to be lifted.

However, in order to remove a US imposed restriction, he lobbied with India. We definitely want the removal of any restrictions on RAB. But first we need to verify the allegations and see if they are authentic. Then, following due action, we can negotiate with the US directly. Instead of that, we sought India's help.

This tendency of seeking India's help in everything does not show an iota of professionalism or diplomatic etiquette, and it is humiliating for the people of Bangladesh, as well as its government and the office of its foreign minister.

Do we understand these issues? If we still don't, that it is an unfortunate situation for us as a nation.

The article was translated from Bangla by Mohammed Ishtiaque Khan.

Vanuatu emerges as global climate champion



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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SALEEMUL HUQ

THE tiny island nation of Vanuatu, located in the Pacific Ocean, is highly vulnerable to the adverse impacts of human-induced climate change. And along with other climate vulnerable island countries in the Pacific, it has been leading the world on the issue of loss and damage.

Recently, Vanuatu prepared a resolution for the upcoming session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York, US in September, seeking an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the topic of loss and damage from human-induced climate change. Such an advisory opinion by the ICJ would not necessarily name any particular polluting country; it would rather give an opinion on whether or not a victim country can bring a case against a polluting country in the future. This would be a legal way to make polluters pay under international law if it goes into effect.

An interesting feature of this bold action by Vanuatu, which has

received strong pushback from some of the polluting countries, was that the idea was first put forward by a group of law students in the Pacific region, who prepared a brief on this procedure of going to the General Assembly first and then to the ICJ for an advisory opinion, and present it to the other island nations in the Pacific. The government of Vanuatu was the one who then took the lead in taking this forward formally, and is now seeking the support of all the vulnerable developing countries for the resolution at the upcoming UNGA session. If this resolution is passed, then the ICJ can give an advisory opinion on the legality of loss and damage claims between countries.

This is not the only arena where loss and damage court cases are taking place. There are by now dozens of cases being taken forward under national law jurisdictions where citizens, in many cases youth, are suing their own governments for not doing enough to protect them from the incurring losses and damages

from human-induced climate change. These cases are making their way up the court systems in countries like the United States, Germany, Australia and the Netherlands. Some are making good progress.

The main reason for resorting to courts, both under national and international jurisdictions, is that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has failed to adequately deal with the issue of tackling liability and compensation for losses and damages suffered by the victims of pollution. Thus, even though the vulnerable developing countries have raised this issue at the annual climate change conferences (Conferences of Parties - COPs) of the UNFCCC for many years, they have not been able to get an agreement as the polluting countries have always blocked any discussion on liability and compensation. Hence, while the struggle to take this issue of finance for loss and damage is still being pursued by the vulnerable developing countries, other avenues of legal actions against the polluters need to be explored.

There is also another movement, mainly by civil society actors, to target the fossil fuel companies who not only have caused pollution for decades, but also profited from the losses and damages they have been responsible for. At the same time, a number of countries who block discussions

at the COPs are also fossil-fuel-exporting countries. The argument by civil society groups is that the fossil fuel companies should be forced to pay compensations to their victims.

Even though this is still a long shot, it is worth using to frame the polluters as the villains who are causing the losses and damages.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that some efforts are also underway to provide finance to the victims of human-induced climate change through funds allocated by the governments of Scotland and Belgium's Wallonia, as well as a number of foundations. At the same time, the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), a platform of climate vulnerable countries across the world, and its finance ministers (collectively called the V20) have created a fund facility to support the victims of climate change in vulnerable countries to support them as quickly as possible.

Vanuatu's example as a global champion of climate action and against loss and damage can be followed by all countries, including Bangladesh. We hope the resolution proposed by Vanuatu will pass with overwhelming support at the UNGA session next month. Also, we hope that all the countries will agree to adopt loss and damage as a standing agenda at every COP, starting with COP27 which is scheduled to be held in Egypt in November this year.