

Restoration of natural drainage a must

Prioritise immediate unclogging of canals in Noakhali

We are concerned by the prolonged inundation in eight upazilas of Noakhali since the flooding in early August, which has affected the lives, health, and livelihood of at least 21 lakh residents of the district. The protracted submersion is an eye-opener for us and highlights the consequence of human greed. As per a report in this daily, the floodwater could not recede because of the obstructions in the natural drainage system of the district caused by human activities.

Encroachment of canals and other water bodies for fish farming, clogging of canals with garbage including non-degradable plastic waste, and the construction of dams and sluice gates without proper long-term impact studies or input from locals are impeding the flow of the floodwater from Noakhali to the sea via the Meghna River. The situation is so dire that between 60,000 and 70,000 people in the district have been living in shelters for over a month. Since most of these shelters are educational institutions, thousands of students in the district are unable to resume their academic activities.

The stagnant water is not just destroying the homes and properties of residents, many of them also have to travel long distances to collect safe-drinking water. While the flood caused significant loss of crops, livestock, and fish enclosures, the standing water is expected to negatively impact soil fertility and, consequently, the livelihoods of farmers. In some areas, there are reports of a shortage of animal fodder. Additionally, there is a risk of an outbreak of waterborne diseases. To make matters worse, fresh flooding in low-lying areas of several districts including Noakhali have been forecasted by the Bangladesh Meteorological Department and Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre. That would make the inundation worse.

The situation in Noakhali underscores the urgent need to protect our rivers, canals, and other natural water bodies from encroachment, pollution, and unplanned development. While we appreciate the environment adviser's plan to free at least one river in every division, the canals in Noakhali should be unclogged, excavated, and restored immediately as a top priority. The government must also ensure that concerned authorities work with experts and locals to identify the problematic government infrastructures exacerbating the standing water situation and develop sustainable solutions to the problem. In the long run, we hope the interim government will be able to strengthen the National River Conservation Commission to revive and protect our rivers and canals from human-induced environmental degradation in the future.

Attacks on women must stop

Take action against those who harassed women in Cox's Bazar

We are deeply disturbed by the repeated incidents of harassment of women in public places over the past month by individuals who apparently consider themselves above the law. In the latest incident, a group of men led by Mohammad Farokul Islam, a local resident, attacked several women in Cox's Bazar on the night of September 11. Video footage showing the men beating the women with sticks and verbally abusing them has been circulating on social media, as the group themselves posted the videos, boasting about their actions. Last month, we encountered a similar video showing a man harassing and beating women in the capital's Shyamoli area with a stick. These incidents of vigilante justice are a troubling sign for the country and calls for urgent action by our law enforcement agencies.

Reportedly, the men verbally abused a woman at the beach and forced her to do sit-ups while holding her ears. They also questioned another woman about her presence late at night and forced her to leave the beach. In yet another incident, Farokul, the ringleader, was seen repeatedly hitting a woman with sticks while she lay on the floor begging them to stop. The question is, what were the tourist police doing when these criminal offences took place? Farokul even defended their actions on Facebook, labelling the women they attacked as "prostitutes." Even if his claims were true, who gave them the right to beat and harass them? This trend of mob justice, moral policing, and targeted attacks on women must stop.

Since a case has been filed against six people including Farokul, after his detention on September 13, we urge the police to immediately arrest all the others responsible for the attacks on women in Cox's Bazar. It also needs to be investigated whether anyone in the local administration is behind the group, as Farokul claimed that he was being backed by the administration.

We also call upon the home adviser and the police to send out a strong message that mob beatings and attacks on women won't be tolerated anymore. And that if anyone is involved in vigilante justice, they should be handed over to the police. It is only through upholding the rule of law and ensuring justice for victims that we can eradicate these heinous practices from the country.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



The Nuremberg Laws are passed

On this day in 1935, the Nuremberg Laws, among the first pieces of racist Nazi legislation that would culminate in the Holocaust, were passed in Germany; designed by Adolf Hitler, they deprived Jews of German citizenship and forbade marriage or sexual relations between Jews and "citizens of German or kindred blood."

Unanswered questions about the Pilkhana massacre

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



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There are renewed calls, and rightly so, for a fresh inquiry into the BDR killings. Newer allegations of actions and inactions are emerging from various sources, some claiming to be direct witnesses who had heretofore not dared to speak publicly. Even the former chief of army staff (CAS) has tried to offer an excuse that certainly doesn't wash with the public.

February 25 remains a day of calumny, ignominy and anguish, with the brutality perpetrated by the mutineers and killers unmatched by anything in recent memory. It is also unparalleled in the duplicity of certain people in important positions within the administration. Time cannot heal the pain, and the earthly supplements given to the victims' families are but a palliative that may put only temporary gloss over the wound.

Let's put the tragic statistic in perspective. On that day and the day after, 57 of the best and brightest officers of the Bangladesh army were brutally put down. Thirteen others were also killed in the process. Compare that with the number of officers martyred during the Liberation War—over the course of nine months, we lost 47 officers.

But why bring up this matter after 15 years? Has the issue not run its course? With an official inquiry completed, its findings (incomplete though) and a raft of recommendations made public, one would assume that the matter would be behind us. It bears mention that the inquiry report in its entirety has not been made public, and the original version has been heavily redacted.

The killings, along with the mutineers' actions in the following two days, suggest a well-thought-out event that stemmed from expert planning. As long as the real motive and mastermind remain a mystery, this matter cannot be considered closed, and despite ongoing legal proceedings, further investigation is warranted.

Admittedly, the mutineers have been tried, with many BDR members sentenced to various prison terms. Some are even out of jail after completing their sentences, while a large number are facing the death sentence. But like me there are many, and not just within the military fraternity, who are still in the dark about many aspects of the case.

The first question is whether any action has been taken on the primary



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FILE PHOTO: STAR

recommendation of the Anis-uz-Zaman committee, that further investigation is needed to uncover the true mastermind behind the incident. This is crucial, as even the committee admitted that "the real cause and motive behind the barbaric incident could not be established beyond doubt."

The current administration should immediately follow up on the committee's recommendation and conduct further investigation to get to the bottom of the mutiny. The "dal-bhat" explanation is too trite to be accepted as the causative factor of the rebellion that had matched, in some aspects, the Pakistani brutality of 1971. It may have been a secondary factor, one exploited by those orchestrating the mutiny.

The handling of the episode itself merits thorough scrutiny, although some may take issue with my suggestion. We cannot ignore the fact that the BDR jawans also revolted in 1991, and the general opinion is that the matter was handled too leniently. The leaders of the 1991 revolt got off lightly, and that may have had a part in this mutiny too. The purpose of an investigation into an event like February 25, 2009, is not only to identify and punish the perpetrators but also to learn from the mistakes and

unfortunately, military commanders lost sight of that—or was it deliberate inaction? I wonder.

Former army chief Moin's excuse of following the chain of command betrays his puerility at its worst. If he had been worth his salt, upon learning of the killings of officers and their families, he would have immediately dispatched troops to BDR HQ to save lives, informing his superiors afterward. Under such circumstances, waiting for permission to move troops was not mandatory. Moin, along with those above him, including the then prime minister and others in positions of responsibility, have blood on their hands and must be brought to justice.

Calling the mutineers to the negotiation table—with the head of government no less—after they had already killed many officers and their families reeks of conspiracy. This method for dealing with mutineers is unheard of. Negotiating, and asking the mutineers to surrender their weapons after 52 of the 57 officers had already been killed, displays a pathetic ignorance of how to manage such a critical situation, where a large number of officers and their families were being held hostage.

The argument of avoiding collateral

Another example of incompetence was the so-called surrender of weapons to the home minister. Why did the security forces not immediately enter the BDR complex to secure the area once the mutineers had surrendered? It is now known that several officers were killed by the mutineers in the early hours of February 26. And why was the rear gate of the BDR complex left unguarded, allowing many mutineers to escape with weapons under the cover of darkness?

One wonders whether the administration has delved into the performance of the intelligence agencies. Did none of them get wind of what was about to happen? With so many of them deployed in sensitive areas and units, how did none of them pick up on any signs of unrest?

The conversations between the CAS, the then PM and the intelligence agency heads must be scrutinised. Many unknown facts would likely emerge. Alleged complicity of political leaders in the killings must be investigated, as must be the possible involvement of foreign hands in the massacre. Only when the true masterminds behind the BDR mutiny are identified and brought to justice can we draw a conclusion to the matter.

Critical challenges facing the economy

AN OPEN DIALOGUE



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The head of the interim government, Prof Yunus, recently formed a committee to prepare a "white paper on the state of Bangladesh economy." The terms of reference for the committee are very broad, but the key task is to present the true state of the economy, outline key weaknesses (and, if possible, identify the sources), and, most importantly, provide a roadmap for the interim government.

One cannot overstate the white paper's role in shaping the new administration's policies and forthcoming reforms. Fortunately, the committee has already invited public input, and I am confident that the committee and the competent support staff will accomplish their mission.

It is tempting to throw my hat into the ring and write a long email to the committee and offer my professional view on the cardinal issues facing the country along with my ideas on curtailing corruption, stabilising the foreign exchange sector, reducing income inequality or alleviating poverty. But I will resist for two reasons. First, I have complete faith in the competence of the committee members, with some of whom I have exchanged opinions and thoughts in various forums. Secondly, the experts in the group—and outside—have voiced their learned opinions in professional journals and social and print media over the last few years on

the goals of this nation, its progress, and the roadblocks. In other words, the research is already there. The nation is waiting with bated breath for this august body to practice due diligence, given the resources provided at its disposal, and come up with its own prognosis and suggest some best practices to help the new government achieve its economic goals before the latter hands over power to elected leaders.

Professor Yunus in his first speech to the nation last month identified three areas that deserve utmost priority: banking, corruption, and undue emphasis on GDP growth. The data from the past Household Income and Expenditure Surveys carried out by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) over the last two decades clearly indicate the trend pointing to the rising levels of income and wealth inequality. Whether we take the well-known measure, the Gini coefficient, or an alternative measure, such as the Palma ratio, and compare the income share of the top 10 percent with the income share of the bottom 40 percent, the signs are clear. We are heading towards a very unequal society. The committee must address this issue and debunk the previously held trickle-down theory.

Another important aspect of the white paper is a thorough diagnosis of the economic malaise of the

country. What role did the various irregularities play in inflating the cost of megaprojects, the collapse of the financial infrastructure, and the economic hardship of the average person? Did the previous regime fudge the data and paint a rosy picture of the condition of the masses? How did the elite and the politicians manage to evade the rule of law and siphon

What role did the various irregularities play in inflating the cost of megaprojects, the collapse of the financial infrastructure, and the economic hardship of the average person? Did the previous regime fudge the data and paint a rosy picture of the condition of the masses? How did the elite and the politicians manage to evade the rule of law and siphon billions out of the country?

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But then after all the diagnosis is done, the committee needs to prioritise the issues to inform the interim government's next steps. Obviously, the interim government does not have to promise any miracles. Our people understand that we went through some rough patches and the interim government and all the wise men and women involved in rebuilding our political system, economy, and

the administrative structure face serious odds. Nonetheless, it is worth reminding ourselves of the immediate and long-term problems that will be with us regardless.

The country witnessed food price increases in the double digits for months in a row, and there are still no signs of prices cooling down. These increases leave their mark on the budget since, even if there is a deceleration of inflation, recent inflationary hikes have already hit consumers' pockets hard. According to one BBS study at the end of 2023, one in every five households in Bangladesh experienced food insecurity.

To ensure success of the above initiatives, the state must effectively identify vulnerable people and thereby determine the nature and duration of the support they will need, ensure that the genuinely poor and vulnerable people receive support, and monitor the channels to ensure efficiency, transparency, and accountability in the distribution chain.

The previous government was overthrown because of its economic mismanagement, so if the interim government promises that it will try to manage it well and avoid corruption and greed as much as possible, based on the recommendations of the white paper and allow a task force to implement policies in order of priorities, that itself will be a first.

The white paper committee must also be mindful of its audience. Who are they? There are three: policymakers, the general public, and to a lesser degree, the experts. The people need to know the actual state of the economy. Experts already have a good understanding of the former regime's misdeeds. It is the policymakers in the interim government who urgently need a roadmap.