

NATIONAL POLICY REVIEW FORUM

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Govts grilled for failing to empower women

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Speakers at a forum came down heavily on all the past governments including the ruling BNP for not fulfilling their pre-election pledges to the empowerment of women.

Most of the political parties do promise in their election manifesto to increase reserve seats for women in the parliament and introduce the option for direct election, speakers at the National Policy Review Forum on 'Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment', held at the Academy for Planning and Development Auditorium observed yesterday.

All governments also promised that the women members of the parliament (MP) would be included in all standing committees. But no parliamentary standing committee has yet included a woman MP yet.

Dr Kaniz Siddique, associate professor of North South University,

in her keynote paper, said that violence against women is increasing at an alarming rate. Violence against women is being used as a tool for political rivalry and other disputes.

Kaniz Siddique blamed the past governments for failing to ensure the political, legal, security, safety, economic opportunity and social rights for women. She also demanded steps be taken to stop violence against women.

The third working session of the forum, organised by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), The Daily Star and the Prothom Alo, was chaired by Khushi Kabir, member of the Task Force and coordinator of Nijera Kori, an NGO.

CPD chairman and eminent economist Professor Rehman Sobhan said that the government should immediately ensure women's participation in the deci-

sion-making process at all level.

"Women in our country are deprived at all level. The government assured us many times but they failed to fulfill their commitments."

Professor Najma Chowdhury, former advisor of caretaker government, was present as chief guest while Ivy Rahman, secretary of women affairs of central committee of Awami League (AL) attended as special guest.

Najma Chowdhury said that a national commission for women should be formed at earliest to monitor the action programmes on gender equality and women's empowerment.

Ivy Rahman meanwhile said that 19 months have passed but the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) did not yet implement their election promises.



PHOTO: STAR

Khushi Kabir chairs a session on "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment" of the three-day National Policy Review Forum 2003, organised by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), The Daily Star and the Prothom Alo at the Academy for Planning and Development Auditorium in Dhaka yesterday. CPD Chairman Professor Rehman Sobhan is also seen.

Role of bank management key to making money loan court effective

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

In order to make the new money loan court law effective, all parties concerned including bank management and officials in particular should play the key role, a task force report on financial sector reforms said.

It, however, suggested bank management take step for an out of court settlement and not to reschedule default loans more than twice.

The task force report on 'Financial Sector Reforms' was presented at a working session of the three-day National Policy Review Forum 2003 organised by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), The Daily Star and the Prothom Alo held at the CIRDAP auditorium in Dhaka yesterday. Bangladesh Bank Governor Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed attended the session as chief guest while Professor Wahiduddin Mahmud chaired it.

Professor Mahmud said there is a continuation of reforms in the

banking sector as both the present and previous governments accepted many of the suggestions of the Bank Reform Committee.

He said although there is scope for making further corrections, many of the prescriptions pursued by the donors are 'tough' and difficult to accommodate.

Speaking at the working session as special guest, opposition lawmaker Md Abdus Shahid said though there are laws, there is no favourable environment for implementing those.

Criticising the performance of nationalised commercial banks (NCBs), former deputy prime minister Jamaluddin Ahmed said even the central bank does not have the disclosures and audit reports of these state-owned banks.

"It is unfortunate that NCBs, who perform 50 per cent of the total banking business, do not have accountability and transparency," he observed.

Former deputy governor of

Bangladesh Bank Khondkar Ibrahim Khaled said during his tenure he tried several means to carry out reforms in the banking system but it yielded little results. "I think the situation should change... we should get more results."

Managing Director of National Credit and Commerce Bank Limited (NCCBL) M Aminuzzaman said there has to be support from the government and bank management in controlling the trade union activities.

Former central bank deputy governor Dr Sohrab Uddin said the government should initiate steps to make the capital account convertible.

Earlier, presenting the task force report Director of BIMB Dr Toufic Ahmed Chowdhury said memorandum of understanding for the NCBs prepared by International Monetary Fund (IMF) should be made public and discussed in the parliament.

Ban on poly bag, 2-stroke 3-wheelers lauded

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Environment and water resources experts yesterday lauded the significant achievements in the field of environment but felt there are many other ways to improve the environment.

They also emphasised updating the National Environmental Policy, which was prepared in 1992 to meet the present demand and future challenges.

They called for more pragmatic steps for improving the overall environmental situation.

The experts were speaking at a discussion on the taskforce report on "Environment Policy" of the three-day National Policy Review Forum 2003 organised by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), The Daily Star and the Prothom Alo.

The speakers said two specific steps -- ban on two-stroke three-wheelers and polythene shopping bag -- have brought a great relief to the people, particularly in Dhaka, but more steps are required to free the country from environmental hazards. Chairman of the taskforce and Country Director of IUNC Professor Ainun Nishat presided over the session.

Professor AK Enamul Haque of

Economics Department of the North South University presented a keynote paper. Water Resources Minister Hafizuddin Ahmed addressed the session as chief guest.

Ahmed said arsenic mitigation should be given top priority and suggested for both short and long term measures to provide safe water.

He said though the government has a national policy on arsenic contamination, there is no significant steps taken to implement the policy.

He suggested the government should develop comprehensive action plan to provide arsenic-free water in all townships and observed the red-marking of tube wells in rural areas is not enough to deal with the situation.

Professor Enamul suggested development of a strategic plan for promoting surface water for agriculture and household use, ensure adequate replenishment of the underground aquifers by protecting wetlands, forests and open fields, and improve management of surface water bodies to make better use of monsoon water during dry season.

He suggested steps in the sub-

sectors like air pollution, transportation system, fuels, surface water pollution and management, waste management, wetland management, sanitation, forest and protected area management, natural disasters, land degradation and water bodies.

The water resources minister said around 200 crore people across the globe, including 12 crore from Bangladesh, have been facing serious water crisis. He said the water crisis in Bangladesh is increasing day by day as 54 out of 57 rivers have their origins outside Bangladesh. Water flow in the rivers is decreasing after signing of each agreement, he added.

Ahmed said preparation of National Water Management Policy is at the final stage and expected to be approved in August.

He emphasised on adequate budgetary allocation in the water resources sector and said in nineties the allocation was around 13 per cent of the budget, but in recent years it gone down.

In this context, he said the government this year imported 28 lakh tonnes of food and that such imports could be reduced if adequate investment and allocation were made in

the water sector.

Department of Environment (DoE) official Dr Mizan responding to a question said the department requires more manpower as it is not possible to improve the environment across the country with only 25 to 30 officers.

Dr Mahfuzul Haq of Ministry of Environment and Forest said necessary work is underway to update the National Environment Policy.

He said the task force report should recommend and suggest means to make the environmental policy updated.

Dr Atiq Rahman of Bangladesh Centre for Advance Studies said government is not spending money for improving the environment. He said the rate of implementation is inadequate and the government should look into the implementation stage.

Jatiya Party MP GM Qader, former secretary Quamrul Islam Siddiqi, Chief Engineer of Shipping Department Matiur Rahman, experts Rasheda Newaz, Abdur Rab Mollah, Shahnaz Hossain, Mesbah Hossain and Razia Qader also took part in the discussion.

Parliament debate needed to ensure transparency and accountability

Politicians observe in discussion on Budgetary Discipline & Fiscal Programmes



PHOTO: STAR

State Minister for Finance and Planning Anwarul Kabir Talukder speaks at a working session on 'Budgetary Discipline & Fiscal Programmes' of the three-day National Policy Review Forum 2003, organised by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), The Daily Star and Prothom Alo yesterday in Dhaka. Former finance ministers SAMS Kibria and M Syeduzzaman are also seen.

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

All important public debates, including budgetary and fiscal ones, should take place in the parliament to ensure transparency and accountability, political leaders observed yesterday.

They made the observations while speaking at a working session on 'Budgetary Discipline & Fiscal Programmes' of the three-day National Policy Review Forum 2003, organised by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), The Daily Star and Prothom Alo. Former finance minister M Syeduzzaman chaired the session held at CIRDAP auditorium in Dhaka.

State Minister for Finance and Planning Anwarul Kabir Talukder attended the session as chief guest. He said the government is not patronising 'godfathers' rather it is trying to control the activities of criminals.

The minister identified poverty and poor educational standard at primary level as two major challenges of the govern-

ment.

Earlier, former chairman of Public Accounts Committee (PAC) Professor Ali Ashraf said criminals are becoming more dominant players in politics.

He said the parliament costs Tk15,000 per minute while in session. "But to make the parliament effective, the government has not yet formed all the standing committees."

Professor Ashraf said the PAC, a key body essential to ensuring transparency and accountability of public expenditure, is yet to be formed.

With deteriorating law and order, local entrepreneurs are feeling discouraged to invest," he said. "In a situation like this, how can one expect that foreign investment will take place?"

Earlier, presenting the taskforce report, Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya said weak export performance, declining foreign aid, and diminishing foreign direct investment (FDI) keep the balance of payment (BOP) vulnerable to external shocks.

The challenge of macro-economic management will become clear if investment picks up, Dr Bhattacharya said.

He said fiscal balance, as well as the BOP, improved perceptively during FY02 and FY03. While some of these came about through consociative policy choices, a large part of the adjustment took place by default, since Annual Development Programs (ADP) could not be fully implemented.

"This influenced positively the fiscal balance and the government's need to borrow. Similarly, the BOP improved due to import drop, in a period of export slowdown, and the role of different factors in enhancing the remittance flow," the economist said.

"Whatsoever, the fundamental weaknesses of public finance largely remain in place. These include low revenue effort with marginal share of direct tax, rigid revenue expenditure structure along with low quality of many ADP projects."

Speaking at the forum, former

finance minister SAMS Kibria mentioned price of essentials shot up by 20 to 50 per cent after the present government assumed office while the income of the people did not increase even by one per cent.

Rural economy is now stagnant, he said, mentioning that construction of schools and bridges have been left unfinished.

"Without public investment, the nation cannot move forward". Criticising the ADP readjustments, he said ADP size was over Tk19,000 crore which later came down to Tk17,000 crore. Of the amount, 70 per cent will be implemented making it around Tk12,000 crore, which will not make the economy vibrant, he added.

Former secretary Moshir Rahman said in addition to the dialogue in public forum, the taskforce reports can be a focal point in the parliament.

High interest rate stands in the way to industrialisation

Speakers observe at discussion on industrial policy, privatisation and SME

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Participants yesterday at a discussion on industrial policy, privatisation and SME identified high rate of interest as the main barrier to industrialisation process in Bangladesh.

They said commercial banks are doing brisk business by charging high interest and are declaring hefty dividends within a few years of inception.

"Finding this to be more profitable than conventional business, businessmen became attracted in banking business," said Kazi Zafrullah, ex chairman of the Privatisation Board, now renamed as Privatisation Commission (PC).

Privatisation Commission Chairman Enam Ahmed Chowdhury attended the discussion as chief guest. The discussion is a part of three-day National Policy Review Forum 2003 organised by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), The Daily Star and the Prothom Alo. Former Privatisation Board Chairman Kazi Zafrullah spoke as special guest.

QK Ahmed, chairman of the taskforce and chairman of Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad (BUP), chaired the session and AKM Atiqur Rahman, North South University teacher of Department of Economics, presented the keynote paper.

Participants said in addition to

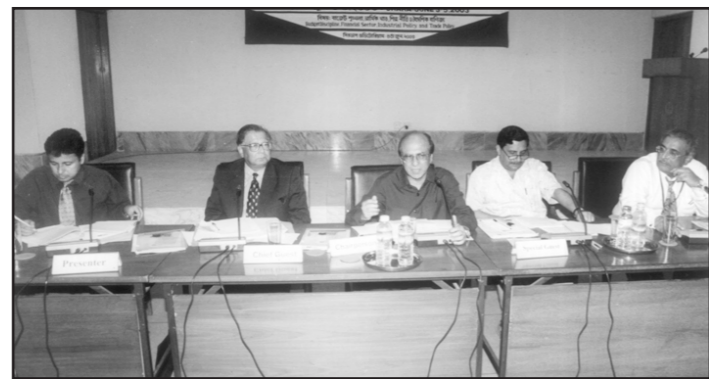


PHOTO: STAR

Privatisation Commission Chairman Enam Ahmed Chowdhury and ex chairman of the Privatisation Board Kazi Zafrullah are seen at a discussion on industrial policy, privatisation and SME of the three-day National Policy Review Forum 2003 organised by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), The Daily Star and the Prothom Alo in Dhaka yesterday.

high interest, extortion, high cost of electricity, water and transportation are making business difficult and non-viable to sustain in the competition.

Terming privatisation as a better process for investment, Chowdhury said without strong political will, privatisation will not be successful. Citing examples of five central Asian countries, Chowdhury said these countries have achieved tremendous success in privatisation and the main reason behind this is strong political will.

Criticising chartered accountant firms, he said the firms are certifying unrealistic valuation of company assets, which discourage prospective buyers of these state-owned companies.

Former Privatisation Board Chairman Kazi Zafrullah said privatisation process should be speedier, otherwise it will fail to attract entrepreneurs. He expressed discontent saying companies, which have been privatised during his tenure, are yet to be handed over to its owners.