

Police plan to checkmate robbery

Patch-work won't do

THE unusually high number of burglaries and thefts committed in the first 20 days of the month of June makes us sit up. And, as we take note of a heightened lack of security of life and property, we can see that the police are trying to be up to the job, even if belatedly.

They have laid bare an action plan that, to our mind, is more reactive perhaps than proactive. The steps that the police have decided to take are basically aimed at making the robbers' job more difficult; but we do not yet know when the law enforcers are going to launch a direct assault on them, many of whom are well-identified criminals and residents of the city. The general belief is that police can bring about a perceptible change in the situation by arresting the known criminals in a week or so.

However, making life harder for the robbers should also be part of the overall strategy of curbing crime. Police should be able to plug a gaping hole if the cellular companies cooperate with them by verifying the addresses of phone users and thus precluding the possibility of anybody getting a phone by giving a false address. This is important because the device is allegedly being used widely by criminals in their operations these days. The idea of checking rickshaws and vehicles after 2:00 at night might also help restrict the movement of criminals.

But we believe that the whole plan of countering robbery should be based on some preemptive actions like effective patrolling of roads and lanes and gathering intelligence on the criminals without any let-up.

The anti-crime drive is often publicised in a wrong way. The authorities should refrain from playing to the gallery while dealing with a matter as serious as law and order. If a deadline is set for arresting the criminals, it has to be met at any cost. Otherwise, questions regarding the sincerity and seriousness of the law enforcers will arise in the public mind. Unfortunately, the deadlines have never been met, and the truth is that the mysteries behind the recent bank robberies are still unresolved. So there is a noticeable gap between rhetoric and reality; and bridging this gap should be the government's prime concern at the moment.

New perks for elected high-ups

Let's be flawed on the side of austerity

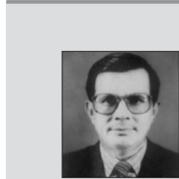
THE Prime Minister, Speakers, Ministers and MPs need their perks raised; but by what margins?

The proposed bill envisages 40 to 400% leap on house rents and other benefits for the lawmakers. But is there any guarantee that such a raise would ensure payment of various bills by the MPs? We have reasons to feel a little finicky on this count. Only recently, an investigative report in a Bangla daily revealed that many MPs have piled up large amounts in arrears telephone bills amounting to over Tk 12 crore. We fail to understand how could they even ask for a raise when they have shown little respect for the sanctity of our democracy by choosing to be absent from the parliament day after day?

Basically, we would like to link the proposals for new perks with the realisation of the outstanding dues. Any raise in the telephone allowance ceiling, for example, should be contingent upon deduction of the dues at the source. But that definitely does not preclude the necessity for them to clear the arrears. The rationale for any increase could only be established with the public if the recipients show greater integrity and sincerity in the discharge of their duties. It's just not enough to say that "when people from abroad learn about our salaries, they make fun of the poor amount." We must remember that 50% of the population still live below the poverty-line and great many of the citizenry are gasping to keep afloat amidst rising costs of living. It is a question of a whole basket of perks amounting to a huge monetary involvement. Therefore, it will be fair to ensure that the allowances did not cross a decent threshold.

At the same time, there should be a mechanism to ensure accountability in terms of spending public money. There have been plenty of instances of misusing benefits and privileges by public representatives with impunity -- thanks to their special status. That better not happen any more. It is in ultimate public interest that austerity is exemplified at the top of the order.

Seed for survival



ABDUL BAYES

AS you sow, so you reap -- runs an adage from ancient times. Seed is the source of all crops, including rice. In Bangladesh, rice is the staple food accounting for more than three-fourths of the calorie intake of population living at lower income scale. Rice cultivation occupies three-fourths of the cultivable land and is mainly an occupation of the poor. The development of seed, thus, is a determinant of the fate of the 'ill-fated' farmers. But seeds *per se* do not seem to support a survival, albeit sustainable, through impacting upon the improvements in livelihoods. What farmers need is good seed for good yield. The relationship is like that of a healthy mother and a healthy child. Healthy seeds mean healthy harvests. The correlation is confirmed on an empirical plane. But sordidly, seeds always remained on the sideline in the realm of discussions on rice researches. Scientists and farmers have long been harping on varietal developments and improvements without paying due attention to the preservation and promotion of good seeds. Perhaps, the necessity of growing more rice at that time knew no law!

Expensive evasions

Such an evasion of emphasis appeared expensive. However, the damages due to "sick" seeds sown have never been quantified, nor could they be quantified in the presence of paucity of data. But to give a glean, allow me to read from a report on seed health and its consequent costs. ".BRRRI estimate a national yield loss due to all diseases of 10-15 per cent of which it is further estimated that two-thirds are fungal, giving a yield loss of 6-10 per cent. The technical advice is that perhaps 20 per cent of these losses is estimated to originate from seed-borne inoculum, implying that 1.2 to 2 per cent of the total rice crop is lost.... This is likely to be a conservative estimate; experimental use of clean seed in farmers' fields in the Philippines has given yield improvement of 5-20 per cent... Assuming also conservatively, that the rice crop averages 18m tons p.a., these losses translate into 2,16,000 to 3,60,000 tons forgone availability annually due to disease.... At the current farmgate price (i.e. 1999), this equates to Tk. 1.3 to 2.2 billion (18 to 31 million Pound sterling) per annum which indicates that the economic problem is on a scale worth tackling."

On board the 'SHIP'

I personally visited one 'key' site of PETTRA sponsored and BRAC-BRRRI collaboration on SHIP. The selected three villages are located at Sutang under Habigonj sadar thana -- about 60 km west of Srimongal. I sat with 17 'resource poor' farmers and they accounted for half of the target farmers selected for SHIP. The interesting point to note is that only five of the participants that I met were males and the rest male farmers were represented by their counterpart females. Indeed, the males could earn Tk.80 to 100/day in this busy season of aus planting rather than listening to a university professor of no practical use to them. But courteous as they were, they sent their spouses who seemed to be no less

Pains of the poor

The loss of yield on account of seed quality falls heavily on the poor farmers. The marginal disutility of parting with a production is different for different land size groups. The larger ones can possibly afford the loss since it would not stand on the way of their survival. But in the case of poor farmers -- with hardly owning one acre or so land and a big family to feed -- such a loss could throw them down the poverty line. Therefore, the marginal benefit of

knowledgeable than the males that I counted on.

All of the 17 persons present were from resource poor households with the following attributes: (a) average size of owned land was 68 decimals (only three of them had more than one acre with a maximum of 1.64 acre in the case one household); (b) only six per cent of them were pure tenants and the rest equally divided between owner and owner-cum-tenant cultivators; (c) average household income per year

Besides, seed preservation training, AAS also supplies foundation seeds to resource poor farmers for growing their own seeds. The resource poor that I met there also had the same features as mentioned before and the impact of the training were more or less the same. But for the sake of this column, I shall concentrate on SHIP as experienced from my visit to Sutang and make reference to the other, if and when needed.

pared to 22,000 now. *Paripassu*, the per capita income also rose over the years.

Third, the increased yield enhanced food entitlements for the households. As noted before, four years back, the sample households had 6-7 months provisions for rice from own farms. Now nine of the 17 farmers can feed family for 12 months from own production. Another five have food security for 10 months. By and large, as they reported, all improved upon food

-- the sample farmers used to tell the teasers. But now -- proudly pointed out by the participants -- the teasers approach them to teach the methods of seed promotion, preparation and preservation. Sometimes they even ask for good seeds to be exchanged for rice for consumption. The exchange takes place provided the participants have surplus seed. It was also reported that neighbouring villagers and richer section within the village also approach them for the same reasons. One female farmer from Sirajnagar informed that her brother from a remote village saw her seeds and requested her to supply to him.

Sustainable survival?

But what would happen when the SHIP leaves the port of the participants? Will they be dropped down? In response to my questions, all of them rose for a "NO". Why? "Because, we shall teach our children and grand children about this cost effective technology so that they do not inherit ignorance like us and fall in poverty trap. Even if we die, our knowledge will keep us alive to our generations" -- replied some of them.

Rice research and the resource poor

Rice researches have rarely helped the resource poor directly and decisively. Undoubtedly they benefited, among others, from the introduction of modern varieties or the green revolution. But rice researches need to be targeted for the resource poor in Bangladesh since (a) they are actively engaged in rice production and growingly becoming dominant among the set of farmers; (b) they could be the victims of the vagaries of nature to join the line of the extreme poor and (c) they are poor because they lack knowledge about the proper management of their meagre endowments. Sometimes extension services could be more powerful and sustainable than mere provisions of micro credit. The PETTRA efforts seem to point to these observations.

Epilogue

At the end of our cordial conversations at Sutang, I posed a question: "what do you mean by poor?" The participants kept mum for moments till Mrs. Razia of Noagaon broke the silence and said: "A blind or a lame without capacity to work is a poor." But why did you enlist yourself as poor in SHIP without being a blind or a lame?" I asked Razia. "It is because you call us so. I am not poor. I have hands to work and legs to walk. Why should I be a poor?" replied Razia.

Driving back to Srimongal and seeing farmers planting aus in the muddy fields, I recollected Razia's reactions. Perhaps poor, not because they are poor but because they are called poor.

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BENEATH THE SURFACE

Rice researches need to be targeted for the resource poor in Bangladesh since (a) they are actively engaged in rice production and growingly becoming dominant among the set of farmers; (b) they could be the victims of the vagaries of nature to join the line of the extreme poor and (d) they are poor because they lack knowledge about the proper management of their meagre endowments. Sometimes extension services could be more powerful and sustainable than mere provisions of micro credit.

regained yield through seed improvement could be large and lucrative for the small than the large.

PETTRA and the poor

With the above-mentioned premises in mind, the Poverty Elimination through Rice Research Assistance (PETTRA) project of IRR initiated a project called 'Seed Health Improvement Project' (SHIP). Researches by the formal scientists of BRRRI and other organizations on seeds are passed on to the informal scientists -- the farmers -- through Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC). The project is participatory in nature in the sense that farmers sit with scientists and exchange experiences. The "resource poor" farmers -- as PETTRA calls them -- are selected on the basis of the following features: (a) households owning not more than one acre of land; (b) households' supply of rice from own fields does not exceed seven months requirement and (c) they spend 100 days or so in working on others' land etc. The selected sample farmers are then trained about roguing the lands (at least three each unit of land) and their spouses are trained on preservation of seed -- on how to sort out seeds and preserve them in proper containers.

Another village that I visited was Sirajnagar under Srimongal thana. The project is managed by the Agricultural Advisory Society (AAS).

Rewarding lessons

Admittedly, the sample size was small and the effects of SHIP could not be captured quantitatively. But allow me to submit some impressionable improvements that I could glean from the deliberations of the "resource poor" farmers that I sat and chat with.

First, came the knowledge. Messrs Feroz Ali (80) and Abdul Bari (70) submitted that for ages, they harvested 8-10 maunds/Kare (34 decimals) of rice. Since they were born, they heard about the same figures from their forefathers. But for the last four years or so and without a break, they have been harvesting 15-20 maunds/Kare of rice. It means an increase of output by 50 per cent or so. But taking the average from all, I reckoned that the rise could be around 40-50 per cent. Thus, knowledge pertaining to seed health led to more output for the resource poor farmers. The same sentiment was echoed by farmers at Sirajnagar.

Second, income of sample households increased. For example, the average income of SHIP farmers was Tk. 19,000/year com-

Learning is light

The participants in the dialogue informed me that their forefathers had no idea about seed health in terms of promotion and preservation and so they had to pay a price for that inherited ignorance. "What is that price?" I asked. "Our present poverty" they replied. But through the involvement in the SHIP, they have learnt (a) how to clean rice fields through roguing three times to weed out the competing crops. Each time roguing requires 2-3 hours. (b) How to sort seeds manually one by one to ensure balanced seeds and (c) how to prepare and preserve them in suitable containers that ensure seed health.

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puted to 22,000 now. *Paripassu*, the per capita income also rose over the years.

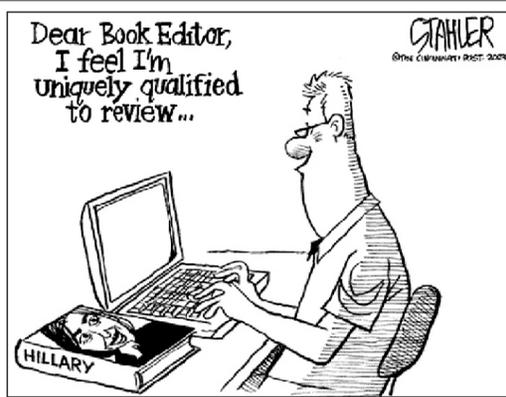
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No troops for Iraq: Don't sanctify US empire!



PRAFUL BIDWAI

writes from New Delhi

THE Indian government is deviously trying to evolve a broad political "consensus" on despatching Indian troops to Iraq without saying where it itself stands. It's allowing the United States to determine the agenda.

As early as May 6, it permitted US embassy officials to meet Indian military personnel. It's President Bush decided on the Pentagon team's June 16 India visit. There's growing pressure on India to send 17-20,000 soldiers to Iraq.

The US wants to get India involved in "stabilising" Iraq's occupation. The Anglo-American coalition has got bogged down. All its plans for Iraq have come a cropper. Its first pro-consul, Lt Gen Jay Garner, quit in disgrace. His successor Paul Bremer has failed to establish a nominally viable government.

There's a near-total breakdown of services in Iraq and growing resistance to Anglo-American

troops. They are badly overstretched.

The US is losing one soldier every other day. Casualties will rise with "Operation Desert Scorpion" and mounting resistance, as in Balad. The US desperately wants other countries' troops in the firing line.

The US' close pro-war allies (barring Britain) have together promised to send only 15,000 troops. The maximum for any country is 3,000 -- Italy.

Thus, India is being asked to show greater loyalty than America's military partners, including even Britain!

All Opposition parties must take a categorical, unconditional stand against troops despatch -- with or without a UN request. Our citizens mobilised themselves strongly against Iraq's invasion in 500 cities and towns. They must oppose Iraq's occupation too with serious street-level action.

The US will use Indian troops as cheap cannon fodder. Even if it eventually "compensates" them on a par with United Nations peacekeepers (\$1,000 p.m.), that'll cost five percent of the expense on every US soldier abroad.

India is politically useful. It's being asked to use the goodwill it enjoys in the Arab world to legitimise the loathed occupation.

The US is anxious to obliterate the circumstances of the Iraq war -- especially, the absence of a casus belli or rationale. That's why it stresses "stabilisation" and "reconstruction", including lucrative con-

tracts.

However, not a single Indian soldier should shed blood for America in Iraq. Indian troops won't be "peacekeepers". They will have to impose order on behalf of the occupation powers -- in ways that suit those powers' interests. This will bring them into hostile confrontation with Iraq civilians.

They will also be exposed to highly toxic material like depleted uranium, which caused the post-1991 "Gulf War syndrome".

A military occupation which follows an unjust and illegal war cannot be just or legal. India criti-

mises the war through a unanimous Parliament resolution. Its rationale was the absence of conclusive evidence that Iraq had operational weapons of mass destruction.

Iraq's WMD programme didn't pose a credible threat. Further UN inspections could have detected and dismantled it. The US and UK bypassed the Security Council and violated the UN Charter.

The invasion breached every criterion of "just war", including military necessity, non-combatant immunity, proportionality of force, etc. This rationale cannot be negated even if the Security Council

reinforced the anti-occupation argument. No WMD have been found in Iraq -- more than two months after Baghdad fell. We know the US and British governments greatly "sexed up" and distorted intelligence reports on Iraq's WMD. This embarrassed even the Defence Intelligence Agency, the CIA and MI-6.

Apart from plagiarising an academic paper, the Blair government ran "Operation Rockingham", designed "specifically to produce misleading intelligence" and create an "excuse to wage war", according to Britain's *Sunday Herald*.

Recent events have greatly makes a request for troops from other countries, as with the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan.

Therefore, no political party should dilute its opposition to Iraq's occupation by invoking the UN. The UN can be manipulated.

The government is wrong to substitute secondary issues -- the line of command for Indian troops, length of stay, arrangements for eventual transfer of power to Iraqis, etc. -- for the primary question: should Indian troops at all be sent to Iraq?

Interest (Development) (Pre-mium)

1 year 5.5% p.a
2 year 6.0% p.a
3 year 6.5% p.a
7.5% p.a

The interest rates allowed in these bonds seem to be low, not even equal to those allowed for Sanchapatra in local currency. So it may not produce the expected results. It is recommended that if the interest rates and tenure are further enhanced then wage earners abroad might place more savings in these bonds and because of longer tenure the government may utilise the funds in development work.

(iv) Wage Earners or Expatriates Bank which was proposed to be established but not materialised so

This credibility crisis has sharpened US-Europe differences -- handshakes at Evian notwithstanding. Mr Tony Blair has survived the war. But he won't be able to lend British support to another US-led invasion.

US Deputy Defence Secretary Wolfowitz now admits that the (hyped-up) WMD claim was an "excuse". US official jargon has shifted from on Iraq's "WMD" to the more ambivalent term, "WMD programmes".

This further discredits the idea of legitimising Iraq's occupation. Yet, some Indian policy-makers are

keen to send troops there. They fall into three groups. The first holds that Indian and US interests largely coincide today on "terrorism" and "Axis of Evil". Sending troops to Iraq is a "test": rather than whine about hegemonism, India must "daringly" show it's a major US ally and a Great Power.

The second group is obsessed with business. It believes troops should be sent if the US awards generous reconstruction contracts to India. It bandies about spectacular figures for reconstruction like \$200 billion, even \$500 billion. This is pure hype. The highest

far is envisaged to go a long way in accumulation of the savings of the Bangladeshi wage earners abroad. Formation of this bank may be guaranteed by the government and only wage earners will qualify to be its shareholders and customers. They will be able to send their remittances direct for purchasing shares and opening deposit accounts which should bear attractive interest rates. Only the shareholders and the government can borrow loans in foreign currency from this bank. This will enable the government to borrow foreign exchange instead of borrowing from foreigners and donors for financing the development works.

If these proposals are heeded and implemented then savings in foreign exchange might rush in the schemes described above. Such savings together may accumulate to over Tk 50,000 crore from remit-

contract so far is \$680 million. Huge deals won't materialise unless America can pump much more oil out of Iraq. This seems near-impossible for a couple of years. Big contracts will first go to US giants like Halliburton and Bechtel, and then to British firms, leaving small crumbs for India.

The third group advocates the Advani line: troops in exchange for US promise to pressure Pakistan to end supporting terrorism. But to smash Al-Qaeda, America needs Pakistan as an ally. This limits the pressure it can put.

And what if Pakistan too sends troops to Iraq -- as Gen Musharraf declared he could do on June 12? This will completely neutralise India's diplomatic "advantage".

The Advani line is based on trading India's policy independence for US favours -- an idea repugnant to a self-respecting democracy. This means India won't stay independent vis-à-vis an imperial US.

All Opposition parties must take a categorical, unconditional stand against troops despatch -- with or without a UN request. Our citizens mobilised themselves strongly against Iraq's invasion in 500 cities and towns. They must oppose Iraq's occupation too with serious street-level action.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

Alternatives to foreign aid

ALI M IDRIS

IN the National Budget 2003-2004, the honourable Finance Minister has forecast a deficit of Tk 15,809 crore out of which Tk 13,206 crore is envisaged to be met from foreign aids and the balance Tk 2,603 crore by way of taking loans from banking system. The size of the budgets, specially Revenue of Tk 27,750 crore and ADP of Tk 23,500 crore is ambitious and represents satisfactory growth. But materialisation of the targets is uncertain as evident from the experience of the past. The revenue target of Tk 23,750 in 2002-2003 will not be achieved for sure by 30th June 2003, because only Tk 18,666 crore has been collected up to 30th April 2003. Same way the ADP may be implemented to the extent of over 70 percent maximum by end of the fiscal year. So obviously questions

arise whether or not it is really necessary to formulate an over ambitious budget and whether or not it is prudent to long for controversial foreign aids and loans.

Apparently the coveted foreign aids and loans seem to be cheap and attractive for the country but in real terms these are not. An analysis is given below:

a) The donors' representatives in the projects have to be paid salaries, allowances, air-fare, provided with car, accommodation and many more facilities.

b) Due to exchange gain of the donors' currency the equivalent Taka figures of principal and interest often go up tremendously surpassing the low interest rates of foreign loans i.e. 2 to 5 percent p.a. Consequently at the end of the term the loan figures increase, sometimes, many fold.

c) In case of commodity aids or

suppliers' credits, the prices given by the donors cannot be verified by comparison with counterparts, rather the dictated prices have to be accepted.

d) Often inefficiency and corruption of the bureaucrats and contractors involved in a project make it more costly. The honourable Finance Minister himself has mentioned that cost of construction of 1 km road amounts Tk 10 crore, whereas it should not exceed Tk. 2 crore.

The factors narrated above make the foreign aids/loans as costly as almost 30 percent equivalent of interest p.a. indicating that these are ultimately not beneficial to the nation. Hence it is imperative that we must look for alternative, cheaper and honourable sources of foreign exchange for the government to utilise in development works. The alternative source

seems to be the banking system and expatriates or wage earners bank.

Banking system

The banking system maintains or may maintain the following savings and fixed deposit schemes in foreign exchange, part of which may be borrowed by government:

(i) Wage Earning Development Bonds for five years (renewable) which is a very popular scheme for saving by the wage earners abroad and traps a good portion of the foreign wages earned. The interest rates on these bonds was at one time 22 percent (compound) p.a., but presently the interest rates have been reduced to 12 percent p.a. which is same as those for Sanchapatras in local currency. It cannot be justified to allow same rate of interest for local currency and foreign exchange savings. In my

opinion, if the interest rates are increased to 15 percent p.a. more savings in Wage Earning Bonds will be forthcoming, which may be used by the government for development work.

(ii) Non-resident Foreign Currency Accounts (NFCD) is also an attractive source of savings in foreign currency by Wage Earners abroad and investors in general. The present rate of interest by Sonali Bank for US \$ is over 10 percent p.a. which is really attractive compared to 1 percent of 2 percent in USA. If economic and political stability is sustained in the country and slight increase is made in interest rates, then savings under this scheme might rise substantially.

(iii) Dollar Bonds which have floated in the market recently through banking channel, bear the following terms and interest rates:

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Ali M Idris, is an FCA, working with an international organisation.