Of the powerful and the weak

Apprehensive pattern of international relations

HABIBUR RAHMAN

FTER witnessing the horror and devastation of the second world war, all the countries of the world combined together in an unprecedented spirit of cooperation and genuine compassion for one another to foster international peace and development. It resulted in the creation of the United Nations. The institutions created under the umbrella of the United Nations and provided an effective multi-lateral framework to address the social, economic and security requirements of the member states. This was particularly relevant to the smaller and weaker developing countries who could use these bodies to accelerate the pace of their development in an atmosphere of relative peace and stabil-

An important feature of the post war era was the emergence of ideological diversities among the nations. While most of the countries of the western hemisphere led by USA followed capitalistic system, a number of other countries under the leadership of USSR followed socialistic system of running the affairs of their countries. The two groups were engaged in a subtle conflict which came to be known as "Cold War". There were occasional flare up among those countries and sometimes it actually brought the world to the brink of armed confron-

However the existence of two groups also provided some sort of balance of power and it helped in containing proliferation and prolongation of armed conflicts and wider instability. The superpowers namely USA, the proponent of freedom and democratic principles and USSR, the proponent of socialism, social justice and rights of the poor, provided leadership in the two camps. Others followed them in some form or other. A group of countries who called themselves "Non-Aligned". generally followed a neutral system although some had leaning towards one or the other camp.

In spite of these diversities there prevailed a semblance of peace and mutual respect for one another and support for the multilateral frame-

work and the institutions. This helped in maintenance relative stability and also a conducive atmosphere to pursue economic and social development

This state of affairs continued for about half a century which witnessed sustained economic growth in many of the developed as well as developing countries. A spirit of international cooperation in the social and economic development under a multilateral framework enabled the member countries to

ing and imposing policies and systems to be followed by the less developed countries. This has made the poorer developing countries much less secure and more vulnerable. In some cases this has also started a systematic erosion of their freedom to govern their own people. The new ideas and concepts which have been introduced by the sole superpower and other powerful nations, have practically endangered their sovereignty. It must be admitted that there are

The more powerful nations under the new system have arrogated themselves to the position of complainants, prosecutors, judges and executioners at the same time. In this process they are the only ones to decide and impose those decisions on the less powerful countries. In most cases practically no scope is offered to the weaker countries even to present their cases. The multilateral framework which have so long offered some protection has become powerless and impotent.

In order to stem the negative consequences of the new type of international relationship, it is essential that the right thinking and conscientious people put their heads together and try to find out appropriate solutions to the problems which are looming large. Economic and social development cannot be pursued without international peace and stability.

develop their potential. Although the Cold War had its shadow on the pattern of development and the type of support provided for such development, their overall economic and social progress continued in a generally satisfactory manner. The nternational community also particularly focused their attention to the poorest of the developing countries, most of which are in Africa and South Asia.

After about five decades, the international scenario started to change with the demise of USSR and the communist regimes of Eastern Europe. The Cold War was over and USA emerged as the sole superpower wielding unlimited and unchallenged authority practically over the entire world. Even those countries which were under the influence of USSR changed their policies and showed clear signs of following the capitalistic and western democratic system.

The state of affairs has given way to a new pattern of international relations. While dismantling of planned economies and socialistic policies were expected to usher in a new era of freedom, democracy and peace, in practice a number of new complications have arisen. Stronger and more powerful nations have now assumed the role of determinreasons for these countries to live in fear of losing their identity and dignity.

The new concepts and ideas which have emerged in the new environment are, among others, in the areas of security concerns, rights of self-defence, doctrine of preemptive strikes and measures to be adopted in the name of curbing international terrorism. In most cases the smaller, weaker and poorer developing countries are at the receiving end of actions taken under these concepts.

The security concerns of the well-to-do and powerful countries have given rise to instability and panic among their poorer neighbours particularly those who have different political or social systems or regimes which are not to the liking of their more advanced neighbours. The examples and precedents which have been set up in some cases have provided ammunition in the hands of the mightier countries to interfere in the internal affairs of their neighbouring countries endangering their security and stability. They are indeed utterly helpless and have no option but to submit to the wishes of their stronger neighbours or to implore the superpower or other powerful states

The apex body namely the United Nations is being systematically weakened, making the situation still worse for the poor states. There is a real possibility that the aggressive policies being followed by a number of powerful nations will proliferate to

Stemming from the security concerns a new dimension has been given to the concept of the right of self-defence. Under this new notion practically any activity can be legitimised as an exercise of right of self-defence. Obviously this can be exercised only by the more powerful nations. It clearly puts the weaker countries at a more disadvantaged position as they can often be targeted in the name of exercising the right of selfdefence by the mightier nations. Based mainly on relative strength, the powerful nations can unilaterally decide the scope and duration of their action with relative impunity, particularly if they have the blessing of the most powerful.

Another dangerous new development is the introduction of the doctrine of pre-emptive strikes, also in the name of self-defence. Under this concept the powerful states can at any time undertake aggressive activities against weaker countries, sometimes without being accountable to any multilateral body or even the United Nations. If pre-emptive strike strategy can be legitimised it will absolve the aggressors from any wrong doing or breach of the prevailing international law. With the erosion of the authority of the UN, the prospect of abuse of this doctrine will increase in the future.

With the rise in international terrorism and particularly after the September 11, 2001 terrorist act, a war on terrorism has started. Although there is almost complete unanimity on the need to curb international terrorism, there are differences of opinion about the form, scope and intensity of operations against the suspected terrorists. In the absence of an effective international watch dog and surveillance mechanism there remains a real possibility of abuse of power and gross human rights violation by the mightier states in the destruction of the terrorist infrastructures, identifying and capturing the terrorists and dealing with the detainees.

These are only a few facets of the new pattern of international relations. More complications may arise with the exercise of the powers which have practically vested solely in the more powerful countries. While the poor nations will have to look forward to the sole superpower and other powerful states, they will have to unwillingly enter into an arms race at least to be able put up some initial resistance. This, by all standards, is a very unwelcome development for world

In order to stem the negative consequences of the new type of international relationship, it is essential that the right thinking and conscientious people put their heads together and try to find out appropriate solutions to the problems which are looming large. Economic and social development cannot be pursued without international peace and stability which may be threatened by the actions of some of the powerful countries.

Habibur Rahman is former Secretary, Ministry of

UP 2002 election, 286 landless

males and females were elected as

members from among the organ-

ised landless groups. Presently,

these representatives are being

trained up on UP functions so that

they can play vital role in establish-

ing transparency and accountability

In the patriarchal society,

poorest of the poor are women.

They are virtually neglected and

deprived from the fruits of develop-

ment. Violence against women is

one of the major obstacles to over-

within Union Parishad.

Risky reform

Koizumi forms a new youthful cabinet

MONZURUL HUQ writes from Tokyo

N Japan the prevailing concept

of politicians in high governmental and party position is of people who have matured with age and a lifelong involvement in political intrigue. Maturity coming with age is considered a virtue in Japan's political world and until very recently it helped aging politicians of the ruling camp to end up in positions of respect and honour. Since politics in Japan, particularly the political game being played within country's main ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), has always been a tense factional fighting to outmanoeuvre other groups in ensuring secured positions in the cabinet loyalty to aging political pundits was essential to sustain and flourish in that rough and tough world where the clash of self interest is abound. Faction leaders, as a result, became immensely powerful because of the unquestionable loyalty that they enjoyed of the lawmakers belonging to their respective factions, and one of the primary responsibilities of the leaders had been to ensure cabinet posts for the most trusted of those followers. As a result, formation of a new cabinet in the past had always been the eventual outcome of tense negotiations between the party president and faction leaders where who gets which position mattered most on the basis of numerical strength of each and every group.

Much has changed in Japan during the last decade since LDP was briefly ousted from power in 1993 for the first time in almost forty years. Although the party regained its position of power within a very short period, the situation never returned to those of its heydays when the party enjoyed a virtual monopoly in the process of forming the governments. From mid-1994 onward. LDP has maintained its hold on the government only through joining hands with small coalition partners and the precarious circumstance called for a radical overhaul of the system of party management. But it eventually turned out that reform is something that the party is immune of. As a result, factional politics within the party continued unabated, but in a somehow watered down form due to the wind of sweeping changes that kept on blowing all around

A second radical shift for the party was marked at the start of the new millennium when Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi was elected to the office for the first time in early 2001 replacing an embattled and cornered Yoshiro Mori. It was a rare occasion that not a faction leader was chosen party chief. As LDP chiefs in Japan traditionally head the government, Koizumi took over the helm from his own faction leader who still continues to lead the faction in which the prime minister belongs to. But for Koizumi the situation came as a blessing as he had to care less about wi reward and whom not within and outside his own faction. This also

allowed him to be less mindful about maintaining a factional balance in the cabinet. The ultimate result of these changes was the gradual waning of factional power that eventually led to the tragic shrinkage of the largest Hashimoto faction iust before the LDP presidential election on 20 September.

How far the consequences of the waning factional influence is going to effect the overall standing of LDP is not clear yet. But at the same time. signs are abound that Koizumi's

As the media in Japan during the past one year has turned the issue of abduction of Japanese national into a tragic drama with high doses of nationalist sentimental feeling, appointing Shinzo Abe to the post of party **Secretary General might** help Koizumi to outmanoeuvre his opponents in the upcoming elections. But the risk remains that the eventual outcome of such narrow calculation might result in the emergence his own Frankenstein.

leadership has been strengthened and if the party can manage to win the next lower house election which many foresee in November, that might put the last nail on a system that dominated Japanese politics for most of the time during the post World War II period. The cabinet that the resurgent Koizumi formed after being reelected to the party presidency also gives clear signal that from now on he will depend less on what the factional leaders are to dictate. A relatively younger cabinet, where the average age of thirteen cabinet members are slightly less than 60 years, has been formed with the idea of achieving two separate goals.

The previous Koizumi government had to make a delicate balance to counter the criticisms of fellow party leaders who for quite some time have been divided into two groups -- one supporting the reform initiatives of the government, while the other opposing it outrightly. The reflection of that division was prominent within the previous cabinet as well, where the moves of Heizo Takenaka, state minister in charge of financial affairs, economic and fiscal policy. were opposed and in some cases countered by the finance minister Masajiro Shiokawa, who represented the anti-reform camp

In his new cabinet Koizumi got rid

of aging Shiokawa and in his place brought in a relatively younger politician belonging to the faction that his onetime close ally, Koichi Kato, once headed. This would allow Koizumi, particularly his trusted state minister in charge of reform. Heizo Takenaka, to move relatively freely in implementing reform initiatives. Retention of Takenaka gives a clear signal that there will be no change in the structural reform policy course that the government believe essential for helping the country to come out of the economic recession.

Another move that highlights Koizumi's focus on reform is his appointment of Nobuteru Ishihara as minister of land, infrastructure and transport. The young Ishihara, son of the outspoken Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara who openly campaigned against Koizumi during LDP presidential election, was state minister in charge of administrative reform in the former cabinet and is a strong supporter of Koizumi's plan to privatize nation's highways.

If economic reform is the longterm goal that Koizumi has set for his new cabinet, it also has a shortterm aim to achieve. Speculations are high that the lower house of the parliament is to be dissolved some time towards the end of October to pave the way for a new general election next month. Koizumi himself also has given hint of such a move. At a press conference immediately after the formation of the cabinet, the prime minister was asked if he would dissolve the lower house in October. Koizumi replied that he thought it was now the right time to ask public to judge the cabi-

In the light of such development

the added task that falls on the new cabinet is to help Koizumi and his LDP to win the verdict of the people But here the cabinet's role will be that of a supportive one as the reelected party president, to give a boost to party's chances in the next general election, has already reshuffled the main leadership posts of LDP. A much younger and nawkish politician well known for his single-minded policy on North Korea has been assigned to the post of Secretary General. As the media in Japan during the past one year has turned the issue of abduction of Japanese national into a tragic drama with high doses of nationalist sentimental feeling, appointing Shinzo Abe to the post of party Secretary General might help Koizumi to outmanoeuvre his opponents in the upcoming elections. But the risk remains that the eventual outcome of such narrow calculation might result in the emergence his own Frankenstein, who in time would probably demand a greater share of the pie that Koizumi is so carefully

For a pro-poor development approach

MD. ABDUL KADER and SOHEL IBN ALI

HE problem of poverty in Bangladesh is a structural one and therefore it should be addressed through structural changes or reforms. If this approach is not taken, all the efforts to arrest the trend may fail. Easily we could have realised some sustainable results from our last three decades of development and poverty reduction activities had there been very effective approaches. One of the major structural problems is lack of access of the majority of people to assets. Here asset means both natural and physical and social and economic assets. Due to lack of access to these assets, the majority of people failed to be human resource themselves. Independent and sovereign Bangladesh is now more than thirty years old. Since its emergence till to date, neither any government paid any heed to not any of the major development partner NGOs loudly raised its voice on the issue of equal opportunities of all to these assets.

The leftist political parties raised these issues. However, it did not reach the grassroots level effectively. Government and NGOs keeping this unequal socioeconomic race going, are creating 'safety net' through providing microcredit, VGF, VGD cards etc. to the poor. But this may not reduce poverty effectively rather keep the poor from establishing their rights on resource and to justice. The other objective of creating 'safety net' is to reserve labour force for the labour investors. It may also not reduce poverty in the country. In reality it may even bring some negative effects if the rate of becoming poor from the non-poor is not reversed altogether. Therefore, the very cause or causes of poverty will have to be eradicated from the society for effective poverty reduction. The unequal distribution of assets and economic discrimination will have to be looked into and the deprivation of the landless poor and the disadvantaged mitigated

Bangladesh did not make notable progress in income-poverty reduction since independence. The income-poverty trends since the early nineties based on the unitrecord data of the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) show the following pattern. Between 1991/92 and 2000, the incidence of national poverty declined from 58.8 to 49.8 per cent. indicating a modest reduction rate of 1 percentage point per year. It is not remarkable in terms of our investment in the development field. In the last thirty years we spent a huge amount of local and foreign resources through GOs and NGOs in the sphere of development in Recently, Bangladesh has formu-

lated country's 'Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper' and presented it to 'Bangladesh Development Forum' for getting foreign aid. The current year's budget also reflected the PRSP concept. The government and development partners think that this is the significant way to reduce poverty from the country. In the PRSP, it is said that there are many routes and multidimensional characteristics leading to poverty reduction. These will combine measures to address underlying causes and practical interventions to mitigate poverty. The strategic elements of anti-poverty policies and institutions will cover five broad avenues.

The first set of policies would accelerate and expand the scope for pro-poor economic growth for reasing income and employment

emphasis on empowering the poor and achieving gender equality) have been made the overarching strategic goals. Adopting a comprehensive approach and taking into account the country's past international commitments (such as the MDGs) and evolving national realities, the strategy envisions that, by the year 2015, Bangladesh would

achieve the following targets: (i)Remove the 'ugly faces' of poverty by eradicating hunger, chronic food-insecurity, and extreme destitution:

(ii)Reduce the number of people living below the poverty line by 50 per cent:

(iii)Attain universal primary education for all girls and boys of primary school age;

(iv)Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education;

(v)Reduce infant and under-five mortality rates by 65 per cent, and role in providing livelihood to the deprived people. Land is the most significant natural asset in the country. How-

ever, majority of the people do not possess any land. But, there is a considerable amount of 33 lakh acres of khas (government owned) land in the country. As per the existing policy, these lands should be entitled for use by the real landless people. Unfortunately, in reality, an unholy coalition of some corrupt bureaucrats, politicians, local elites and influentials is illegally occupying these resources through false documents and show of muscle nower. The poor have little power to contest this injustice. But they are in majority. They can raise their voice to establish their statutory rights. And in this process of eradicating injustice from society at least NGOs can play an effective role. In this context, at least one NGO -- Samata

The pro-poor policy formulation and its proper implementation are the significant agenda for poverty reduction and development. But still there are a number of obstacles in establishing the rights of the landless people and mitigating structural injustices. Therefore there is the need for lobbying and advocacy with the policy makers... It is high time we think and act on these

of the poor. The second set would foster human development of the poor for raising their capability through education, health, nutrition, employment-oriented skill training and social interventions. The third set of policies would support women's advancement and closing of gender gaps in development. The fourth set of policies would provide social protection to the poor against anticipated and unanticipated income/cons-umption shocks and vulnerabilities to disasters through targeted and other efforts. Environmental sustainability will be a key factor here as a cross-cutting issue. The fifth set would favourably influence participatory governance, enhance the voice of the poor, and improve non-material dimensions of well-being including security, power and social inclusion by improving the performance of anti-poverty and disaster preparedness and mitigation institutions and removing

It is significantly stated in the PRSP that the vision in the present strategy embraces a comprehensive approach premised on a rightsbased framework, that highlights the need of *progressive realisation* of rights in the shortest possible time. For this, poverty reduction (with special focus on the removal of hunger and chronic poverty) and accelerating the pace of social development (with particular

institutional hurdles to social mobil-

eliminate gender disparity in child mortality;

(vi)Reduce the proportion of malnourished children under five by 50 per cent and eliminate gender disparity in child malnutrition: (vii)Reduce maternal mortality

rate by 75 per cent: (viii)Ensure access of reproductive health services to all: (ix)Reduce substantially, if not

against the poor and the disadvantaged groups, especially violence against women and children; and (x)Ensure disaster management and prevent environmental degra-

dation for overcoming the persis-

eliminate totally, social violence

tence of deprivation. It is, however, not enough to recognise the salience of structural issues in the poverty discourse without addressing the political economy which underlies the structural features of a society. Poverty originates in the unequal command over both economic and political resources within the society and the unjust nature of a social order which perpetuates these inequities. We may term these inequalities as structural injustice. Such injustice

exposed to endemic poverty. So, if we really want to reduce poverty we have to address these structural injustices and create access of the deprived poor, more specifically the landless poor over assets which can play an important

remains pervasive in most societies

-- is mobilising the landless people through forming different groups, making them aware of land rights and lastly raise their voice to get khas land from government. The process of land distribution is quiet a lengthy one and always bureaucratic procrastination hampers it and land goes to the fake landless people. Mostly working with land issues this NGO plays a catalyst role throughout the process on behalf of the landless people. Till to date, as a result, around 10,000 landless poor families have got ownership of around 5,300 acres of khas land. In addition, also around 1,000 acres of water bodies have been distributed to the landless people. Besides, through its 78 partner organisations it could distribute another 1,000 acres of khas land to landless people. At the grassroots level, the near-

est political institution is 'Union Parishad'. If this institution acts properly it can play a very significant role in poverty reduction and overall development of the country. However, this institution is captured mostly by local elite and influential people. Therefore, to make it effectively democratic and pro-poor the NGO is also trying to create space for the landless people in this institution. The landless people are made aware their democratic rights and are motivated to participate in the election to represent the poor people, not any political party. In the last come the problems. The motivational activities also include changing attitude and behaviour of men toward women. Samata is also working to resist violence against women and ensure child education especially girl child at the grassroots level through forming 'Women Action Committee' consisting female group leaders. At present, 27 committees consisting 270 female group leaders are working door to door. This needs emulation by others in the interest of society. Besides there are different awareness and skill development training for the landless people so that they can enrich their knowl-

edge and develop themselves through involvement in income generating activities. Village Development Committee (VDC), Union Development Committee (UDC) and Area Development Committee (ADC) are formed in order to maintain the unity and solidarity of the landless people and create their social capital through involvement in different mainstream activities.

The pro-poor policy formulation and its proper implementation are the significant agenda for poverty reduction and development. But still there are a number of even legal obstacles in establishing the rights of the landless people and mitigating structural injustices. Therefore, there is the need for the NGO to go for lobbying and policy advocacy with the policy makers to reform or amend such laws/acts for effective poverty

Now PRSP is there recognising the issues in broader perspective. And if we really want to achieve the 'Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) we should have progressive realisation of the rights of the landless people within a shorter time. However, the existing development strategies (micro-credit service delivery activities etc.) could not yet play the envisaged vital role in realising the rights of the poor and eradicating the existing structural injustices. It seems it is high time we think and act on these issues. the family, and when he feels in a

Md Abdul Kader is Executive Director and Sohe Ibn Ali. Director, of Samata.

As a brother and parent

Some thoughts and observations regarding people with disabilities

JULIAN FRANCIS

NE of my very earliest childhood memories is of my elder brother, sitting, it seemed to me, permanently, in a push-chair and sometimes in a wheelchair. It was something that as a young child I accepted, not knowing that it was unusual. My brother, who is still alive, is severely mentally handicapped with Down's Syndrome and learnt to walk when he was 6 years old and cannot talk. I should emphasise, however, that he has a definite character and personality and in the residential home at which he lives he is a useful, helpful, and cheerful member of society.

Our elder son, Neil, is also severely mentally handicapped and when he was diagnosed as such within a year of being born in New Delhi, we were told by doctors there, as well as in UK, that he was unlikely ever to talk and was expected to walk by the age of about 5-6 years. My wife and I were obviously depressed and completely shattered but that did not stop us from searching out all possibilities of finding a cure. We tried all types of Indian medicine and my wife began to spend a considerable amount of time deep in prayer. This brought her inner peace which helped her deal with the situation. At the same time, we provided every type of stimulus to our son and he began to walk at the age of about 2 years and now at the age of 14 can hold a reasonably good conversation. We have always tried to tell both our son Neil. and his younger brother Rohin, aged 7, that there is no part of the English vocabulary that includes the words -- 'I can't do it'. Neil has become a happy, loving member of

good mood, he can be extremely



Neil (R) enjoyng his brother Rohin's company (recent photo)

helpful to the extent of helping in the kitchen, preparing the table for a meal, and even washing the car or mowing the lawn. If he is not stimulated to be involved in such activities he will just sit in front of the television and watch the many programmes available on British television covering sport.

For a mentally handicapped person, Neil has an incredible memory and a remarkably good sense of direction. Also, because he is on regular medicine because he suffers from epilepsy; whenever another member of the family is ill, it is Neil who will remind that person to take his or her medicine on time.

From these observations, although they are very brief, you can see that indeed Neil is able to participate fully in life even though he may not ever be able to live independently in life. He has all the emotions that you or I have and an enormous sense of humour. He also has the capacity to laugh at himself. In England we like to speak of the handicapped as 'special people', or as 'people with special needs'. Neil's situation is very different from that which faces the handicapped child in Bangladesh, particularly, if that child lives in the rural area However, I have made these few comments and observations from my personal experience with the hope that it might encourage others to feel less lost and hopeless when they know their child is handicapped in some way. I believe there are some others

like me, parents of a handicapped child and it will be useful if they can share their experiences with each other because on many occasions the sharing not only helps other parents but also assists the teachers and therapists working with the handicapped.

Julian Francis is currently working in a GoB-EU funded project rehabilitating homeless and landless families many of whom are struggling to care for a disabled member of their family