

The issue is water use

We need a comprehensive plan

IF we had any radar screen for observing the groundwater situation we would have seen two SOS signals bleeping in and away, both of them related to the overuse of subterranean waters lowering down their levels with all sorts of dangerous ramifications. The first concern is arsenic contamination. This has already acquired the proportion of a disaster by its sheer spread. The worse is yet to come though, as experts tend to view. As though it was not enough, this health issue seems superseded now by another concern which has to do with the livelihood of millions of farmers and at least 55 per cent of the food autarchy that critically hinges on irrigated agriculture.

The country's first-ever groundwater zoning map reveals that indiscriminate lifting of subsol water has led to: (a) fall in the level from 2-7.6 metres to a depth of 7.6-11.3 metres; and (b) three lakh shallow tube-wells out of a total of 11 lakh failing to reach the low level of water to pump it out.

All this points to the need for a greater use of surface water. And nothing, let's repeat nothing, has been done to harness the potential groundwater resources. The superabundance of monsoon waters hasn't been put to use. It is now history that our canals, haors, beels and ponds had been inter-linked with rivers and their tributaries in a vast network which would hold the excess monsoon water to service agriculture in the lean season. There is a compelling need to rejuvenate, by excavation, the derelict water channels. Add new canals where deemed necessary for better linkups.

Equally important is the neglected job of dredging and training the choked rivers. All this is directed to the prime objective of building up a reservoir with excess monsoon water and retention of rain water. Unfortunately, we are nowhere near doing this.

When would the government realise that water is more precious than oil. If war was waged on oil before, all future wars are now predicted to be fought for water.

Hence, we suggest that a taskforce of experts be formed and assigned to draw up a new plan for water use with a focus on surface water. Whatever findings and recommendations we have in the archives should be dusted, sifted through and built up on for the sake of taking up a new plan of action for water management and use.

A vessel with poisonous cargo

Punish those behind it

FOLLOWING a report in the media government had put an embargo on entry of the vessel S. S. Norway into the waters of Bangladesh because of its allegedly carrying hazardous cargo of asbestos. The renowned international organization for protection of environment GREEN PEACE had sent messages all over the world urging not to allow this vessel for scraping anywhere in the world. In February, due to the combined action of Bangladesh Navy and Coast Guard and the refusal by commercial banks to open LC, the ship could not cross into the maritime boundaries of Bangladesh.

The buyer of the vessel apparently did not give up and had been working hard to find ways and means for its entry as a scrap. He allegedly altered the shipping documents in order to avoid the dragnet of law. He admitted to having discussed the matter earlier with senior officials of DG shipping in order to "find ways and means" for a smooth entry.

It now looks as though importing of such hazardous vessels for scrap might have been going on for sometime. As early as last week, a Mongolian flag carrier M.V. Tim was imported by one Arefin Enterprise for breaking at its own yard. This ship, though declared as a passenger vessel, had enough quantity of hazardous asbestos. One wonders as to how the vessel importer was able to obtain the required NOC from the directorate of ocean-going vessels, introduced lately, for stopping the entry of such vessels?

We are highly concerned at these developments. Let no one use our shores for dumping hazardous "wastes" which have the potential of seriously affecting our environment and the health of our people. We are not against any private entrepreneurship but under no circumstances should it be at such high costs to the country and the people. Government needs to take stern actions against concerned officials but for whose collusion such things couldn't have happened. There is hardly any monitoring or supervision of the various agencies involved in dealing with such matters by any designated authority in the government. This is a void we must fill in.

MAHMOOD ELAHI writes from Ottawa, Canada

I am writing this with reference to the article "President Bush in India," by Kazi Anwarul Masud (DS March 19).

President George W. Bush's visit to India was basically prompted by the desire to find a counterweight to China who is seen as a great economic and military threat to the United States. India, as the world's largest democracy and growing economy, is seen as a natural balancing factor vis a vis China.

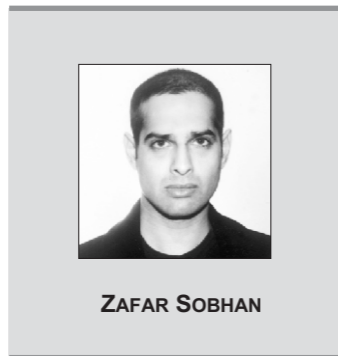
India has always been a democracy and the earlier Cold War confrontation between the U.S. and the Soviet Union prompted the Americans to court India's autocratic rival, Pakistan. But the Cold War was over almost a decade and half ago and yet the Americans were slow to recognise India's importance as a democracy. Even after 9/11, Pakistan emerged as America's main partner in the war against terrorism. Although India has been facing cross-border terrorism from

Pakistan in the same way the Taliban were carrying out attacks using Pakistan as their base, the United States didn't make India as its main partner in the war against terrorism. Now, facing growing insurgency in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Americans are becoming aware of India's importance as a partner against a common threat.

But this is more than simple partnership in the war against terrorism. The United States is becoming increasingly concerned about China and its growing economic clout. During the Cold War, the United States cultivated China as a counter to the Soviet Union and President Nixon's historic visit to China stemmed from that. But it was China which used the opening to the United States to establish its presence in the world. Now the United States is cultivating India to act as a counterweight to a growing China which is seen as the future threat. But the US-China economic relations may be too deep and extensive for India to make any real difference.

Early last year, China achieved

Not a moment too soon



ZAFAR SOBHAN

THE big meeting that was held at the Dhaka Sheraton on March 20 to kick off the civil society initiative for clean candidates was significant, not so much for its subject matter -- though I am in favour of clean candidates as much as the next man -- so much as it was for the fact that it heralded the moment that civil society finally decided to get off the side-lines and enter into the political process.

There can be no argument that the most respected, talented, and accomplished of people in Bangladesh today are members of civil society and not in government.

In Prof Yunus, for instance, we have the pioneer of micro-credit, an authentic Bangladeshi innovation that has transformed thinking about the potential and capacity of the poor the world over, and in Fazole Hasan Abed, we have the founder of the world's largest and perhaps most effective non-governmental organization.

It is not entirely true that all civil society leaders have kept out of politics; after all, it was Prof Zafar Iqbal who spearheaded the opposition to the government's ill-advised initiative to reformulate the educational system. But, by and large, civil society has kept in the background politically. Until now.

Bangladesh is in many ways a unique country. I cannot think of

STRAIGHT TALK

To the extent that civil society finally appears willing to engage itself in retail politics, and has indicated that it will no longer sit on the sidelines as the politicians decimate the country, this is, to my mind, the best news the country could possibly have received. This new-found readiness on the part of civil society to wade into the muck of the political process is the key to better days.

another country which owes so much to its non-government sector (more the NGO sector than the private sector, but the private sector has also played its role), or of any other country that has achieved so much despite the shortcomings of its government.

It's funny, really. The government is always trying to point out that things are not so bad and trying to take credit for all of our achievements. Well, perhaps things are not all that bad and we certainly do have achievements of which to boast.

But the point is that almost everything that Bangladesh has ever achieved has been achieved in spite of the government, not because of it. It is for this reason that government officials' plaintive pleas to the media to develop a more positive story line for Bangladesh together with their concomitant sneering at NGOs is something of a bad joke.

I think it is fair to say that Bangladesh has perhaps the most well-developed and effective NGO sector in the world, providing services to and improving the lives of tens of millions. Be it education, family planning, nutrition, infant mortality, women's rights, you name it, to the extent that pretty much anything is going right in Bangladesh, we owe it to this sector.

In many ways, the role of the NGO sector in Bangladesh is a revolutionary concept, splitting the

difference between the public and the private sector in ways that other countries would do well to emulate. We have understood that the government often is unable to provide services efficiently, but that we cannot necessarily always rely on the private sector to provide a market-based solution either. The solution has been to develop a sector that combines the best of both worlds: the NGO sector. In this, Bangladesh leads the world.

The NGO sector has developed largely as a result of the continual failure of the government to deliver over the years. Rather than dirty their hands and try and climb the greasy pole of corruption, cronyism, sycophancy, money, and muscle that is politics in Bangladesh, many a public-spirited individual has sought to make his or her contribution in the non-governmental sector.

And they have succeeded spectacularly. Prof Yunus is a man of immense genius and foresight. There can be no one who could contest the statement that a man of his vision and acumen would have made a fantastic finance minister or chief executive for the country. We would have been lucky to have him, indeed any country would be lucky to have had a man of his ability in their government.

But surveying the governmental landscape in the mid-1970s, Prof Yunus made a different decision.

He opted instead to become a banker to the poor. And who can argue with his choice when we see how much he has been able to achieve.

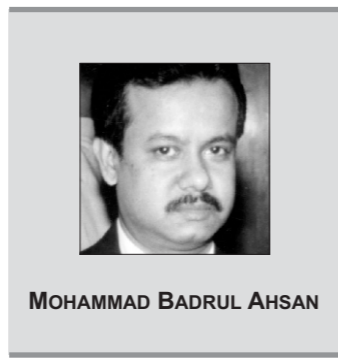
Today there are literally millions of people in Bangladesh who are better off because of the Grameen Bank. Not only that, but from GrameenPhone to the recent food deal with the Danone Group, Prof Yunus continues to do more to develop and advance Bangladesh than any mere politician.

A similar case could be made for Fazole Hasan Abed. BRAC is the largest NGO in the world and benefits the lives of tens of millions. From education to handicrafts to cottage industries to health to legal rights to banking, there is no area that BRAC has not touched. There can be no question in anyone's mind that Mr. Abed can count himself, not only as one of the foremost humanitarians in the world, but also as one of the most accomplished chief executives as well.

There is no question that had Mr. Abed chosen to go into government that he would have been an immense asset to the country. However, there is also no arguing that the path he has chosen to tread has also yielded Bangladesh immense benefits and will continue to do so far into the future.

The same could be said, though to a lesser extent, for the private

Please boycott those who get caught



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

I rked me when a former state minister recently appeared on television and talked about a national situation. It was good to hear his eloquent monologue, his clever response to defend the government. He had a straight face throughout the show as he explained how and why what happened had happened. He looked calm and composed, a smirk of confidence flashing in his face like lightning before summer drizzle. I would have fallen for his charm had I not remembered that he was forced to resign over charges of corruption.

It was disappointing I must say, though I don't blame it on him. He was invited to the talk show in the burgeoning era of cable television, when airwaves ought to be constantly soused with crispy sound bites for endless 'infotainment'. For that we need lots of people to talk, and in that desperation we are constrained to invite even those who are undesirable. But I must say it was sad to see him on that show. It was embarrassing.

Really, it was a shame to watch him on TV when the only reason why he should have been there is to make a confession and offer an

CROSS TALK

Those who run newspapers, television centres, opinion polls, surveys, research centres, policy dialogues, roundtables, conferences, seminars and workshops, for God's sake listen to me. Please boycott anyone who gets caught in wrongdoing. Be it corruption, conspiracy, loan default, murder, bribery or any other mischief.

apology. Instead, he participated in a debate of national significance. A man, who allegedly took bribes and abused his office, was offered an opportunity to comment on the rights and wrongs of our national politics.

Why? Even if the issue in discussion concerned his constituency, why did we have to hear anything from this man? How could we take his words after he already violated our trust reposed in him? Why did we give quality airtime to this man whose reputation can give a swindler run for his money?

I appeal it isn't the only example, neither will it be the last example of how we condoned despicable crimes and gave hero's welcome to notorious men. They are on TV, interviewed by newspapers and magazines, and invited to speak in workshops and seminars. They belong to clubs and associations, many of them sitting on the committees that run schools, madrasahs, mosques and other institutions. Of course, some of these men are people's choice and sit in the parliament.

Should we give lift to these people? Should they be allowed to prowl our social corridors despite their moral failings, some by womanizing, some by defalcation, abuse of power and other depravi-

ties? Those who torture their maidservants, steal from the company, beats their wives or default on bank loans, should we ever let them talk to us about anything?

In fact, corruption persists because we don't realise that public life is an exponential growth of private responsibilities. If we ask for references and credentials before appointing a peon or guard, why should we lower the standard for people who run the country or shape our opinions? Shouldn't we scrutinise these people? Shouldn't we check their backgrounds?

I agree a man isn't guilty until proven. We know there are many rotten people who have shady lives, black money, mistresses, seedy habits, and dubious characters. I agree we should let ten guilty men go before punishing one who is innocent. But what about those men who are known for their grotty characters, people who have lost their jobs under allegations of bribery, extortion, falsehood and deception?

Ten months into his tenure as president of the World Bank, Paul Wolfowitz has started his crusade against "the cancer of corruption" by calling a spade a spade. He blocked US\$800 million in lending to Indian health projects, because Indian politicians were said to

have their hands on the health funds. The bank has frozen lending to Chad, whose government had reneged on a promise to spend its oil revenue on poverty reduction. Five loans to Kenya have been held up because of corruption.

The World Bank has interrupted a project in Argentina that topped up the wages of poor workers, some of which money may have greased the ruling Peronist Party's electoral machine in 2003. The government has brought charges against one senior official and fired 10 others. The bank has postponed debt relief for Congo. Fourteen road contracts in Bangladesh have been cancelled because of corrupt bidding. Two government officials have since been fired, and the private firms involved might be banned from future World Bank contracts.

Time to turn around, and it works. It works because corruption grows in the dark, damp dungeons where our indulgence, like the mythical monster, grows manifold from a drop of silence. We condone, we conceal, until our conscience is devoured by the moths of acquiescence, until we are gagged as evil sinks its fangs into our mind and soul.

At the root of all evil is our inability to stop that evil. We hate the

sector. The garment industry, for instance, was born out of the sweat and toil of millions of workers, but also out of the ingenuity and insight of thousands of intrepid entrepreneurs, small and large.

So it is not as though civil society has sat on its hands and played no role in the development of the country. Far from it. As I have said, almost everything we have achieved as a nation is due to civil society, and not the government.

But there has been one downside to this path to development, and it is this down-side that we are seeing more and more evidence of today in the year 2006. The downside is that if you are content to leave politics in the hands of the crooked and the corrupt and do not wish to dirty your own hands, then this is where you end up: a kleptocracy in which tens of millions do not even have access to safe water and everything from cabinet seats to justice is up for sale to the highest bidder.

Bangladesh has taken the model of a country that operates despite a dysfunctional government as far as it can go. As good as the NGO sector and the private sector may be, we are finding out that there are limits to what a country can achieve with an endemicallly useless and corrupt government.

It is government that builds roads. It is government that provides sewerage system and water and electricity. It is government that must maintain law and order and provide justice. Even if we outsource services such as education, we nevertheless still need government to set up a curriculum and ensure that standards are maintained.

But in Bangladesh we have handed over the reins of government to the lowest common denominator. We have left things in the hands of the crooked and the clueless, and allowed affairs of state to

be run by the absolute worst among us. And so as we enter the election season, we see that we are reaching the point of no return.

This is why for the first time we are seeing civil society truly engage in electoral politics and this is why I support this engagement.

Some might argue that civil society shouldn't take the focus off of the issue of clean elections by focusing too much on clean candidates.

Others might argue that the formula proposed by Prof Yunus for clean candidates is unworkable and that the citizens' group that has been floated to campaign for clean candidates will be unable to deliver.

These criticisms are all worth a hearing and are not wholly without merit.

But let us not lose sight of the important thing: at long last we have seen civil society get off the fence and indicate its willingness to get its hands dirty in politics.

Not partisan politics, though, and that is good. Nothing would split the movement quicker than if it were to be given a partisan sheen.

But to the extent that civil society finally appears willing to engage itself in retail politics, and has indicated that it will no longer sit on the sidelines as the politicians decimate the country, this is, to my mind, the best news the country could possibly have received. This new-found readiness on the part of civil society to wade into the muck of the political process is the key to better days.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

sin, not the sinner even when the sinner doesn't repent his sin. People who steal from others and build their lifestyle around that ill-gotten money, people who don't renounce their possessions, people who keep what they usurp, they don't deserve our compassion, commendation, cognisance or consideration. This is where we need to turn around, this is where we need to flip. We must hate these sinners as much as we hate their sins.

Everything has a price, and so must sin. But if a dishonest man is given indulgence, his profile enhanced by the glamour of publicity, if he is showcased on television or in the pages of newspapers, his views entertained on microphones, this man whose blood is thickened by the inordinate comfort of his fulsome luxuries is, in effect, being rewarded for his misdeeds. This man comes to the studio in style riding the car bought with his questionable money, and then he faces the camera unabashed because we give him confidence that end always justifies the means.

When it comes to that our nation lives in contradiction. It rewards those who are reprehensible. We elect businessmen to the parliament, knowing that their source of wealth is less than honourable. We elect politicians knowing that their past record is despicable. We fall for the glib tongue, our minds trapped in the recurring spell of evil, as if it is our destiny to repeat the same mistake again and again.

Today all bucks stop there. We are unable to crash over this impediment, our lives somewhat captive in the silence that perpetuates in our condescending attitude

towards power and money. We hate nepotism yet live in the awe of those who can give us jobs. We hate greed yet appreciate those who can give us money. We hate fornication and adultery, but full of praise for leaders who are womanizing.

That explains why we have so many successful people in a failed country. That explains why we have dynastic proclivities in the midst of democracy. That explains why we have demons in the guise of devout Muslims. That explains why we have desperate opportunists in the name of enlightened protagonists. That explains why after more than three decades of freedom, our political future still rotates in the vicious cycle of pride and prejudice.

The man who came on TV and the likes of him who appear in the news, talk shows, meetings, seminars, workshops, boards and committees irk me. They make me angry just like the mischievous pimp. Every time they smile at us on the television screen, every time they pretend to tell us about truth and justice, every time they try to tell us anything, we must know who they are before we even listen to them.

Those who run newspapers, television centres, opinion polls, surveys, research centres, policy dialogues, roundtables, conferences, seminars and workshops, for God's sake listen to me. Please boycott anyone who gets caught in wrongdoing. Be it corruption, conspiracy, loan default, murder, bribery or any other mischief.

If you keep showing their faces, it makes the rest of us hide our faces.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

OPINION

India cannot match US-China economic relations

two important milestones: it surpassed Canada as America's greatest trading partner and it surpassed the United States as Japan's biggest trading partner. Although Canada regained its position by the end of the year, it is only a matter of time when China may permanently replace Canada as America's biggest trading partner.

The US-China trade is also marked by a one-sided nature of the trading relation. Although the US-Canada bilateral trade is broadly balanced with the United States exporting \$211.3 billion to Canada while importing \$287.9 billion from Canada, creating a modest \$76.6 billion trade surplus in favour of Canada, the US-China trade is a one-sided affair with the US exporting a paltry \$41.8 billion to China while importing a staggering \$243.5 billion, creating a huge trade surplus of \$200 billion in favour of China.

Where fits India in this? Despite the hype over India's high-tech exports, bilateral US-India trades totalled less than \$27 billion last year with the US exporting only \$8

billion to India and importing a modest 18.8 billion. This is next to nothing compared to massive US-China trades totalling more than \$300 billion. Despite the Indian economic boom, India-US trades are also only a fraction of even US-Mexico trades totalling about \$270 billion or Japan-US trades totalling \$290 billion. The US-India bilateral trade has also been hamstrung by India's crumbling infrastructure, rickety tape and corrupt bureaucracy. India's roads, ports and utilities such as electricity and telephones are in awful shape -- especially compared to the expanding infrastructure projects in China. China has undertaken a vast expansion of its roads, highways and railways unmatched anywhere in the world. Moreover, China has become an important source of credit for the United States which India can never match. China along with Japan are mainly financing the US ballooning budget deficits.

China has also become the main destination of the foreign investment in the world. Despite recent reforms, foreign invest-

ment in India remains limited. This fiscal year, it's expected to total just \$5 billion, vs the \$60 billion that flooded into China last year. Although UBS Securities says that the foreign investment in India is likely to double in the coming years, it will remain a fraction of what China is receiving today. Ambassador Masud is wrong to say that India is the world's fourth largest economy based on purchasing power parity (PPP). It is China with a \$5 trillion (PPP) which is the world's fourth largest economy after the US, Japan and Germany. Moreover, China is likely to overtake both Japan and Germany as the world's second largest economy before the end of this decade. Although Indian economy is growing at a rate of 7.5 per cent, China's economy is growing at a rate of 9.5 per cent. With India lagging far behind China, the gap between China and India will only grow. Increasingly, China is becoming a supplier of high-tech electronic products at a relatively moderate price. America's retailing giant

Walmart is considered actually a trade emporium for China, buying and selling high quality Chinese products at affordable prices.

With such close economic ties, it is unthinkable that US-China relations will become a military confrontation as existed between the US and the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union never enjoyed any economic clout and the US-Soviet trade was nothing compared to that with China. However, growing economic relations have brought new tensions. As China's new economic might helps it acquire geopolitical clout, its growing political power and strategic presence may also hinder the rest of the world's ability to prod China to compete on a level economic playing field. From growing economic might, the Chinese arrogance might also grow. It is China's firm declaration that it will use force against Taiwan if needed to bring it under its control that has made the United States to look for military balance in the Asia-Pacific region and the United States thinks here India can play an important role to

balance China. But India is hobbed by its own nuclear confrontation with Pakistan and various insurgencies at home and can only play a limited role. In the future, we will see more US-India joint military exercises and the United States providing more military hardware and training to India. But given its own limitations, India can play only a very limited role as a counterweight to China in the Asia-Pacific region. A remilitarised Japan will be able to play that role much better.

However, given the closer US-China economic relations with both countries becoming each other's most important trading partners, it is unlikely that China and US confrontation will ever reach the scale of the US-Soviet confrontation. President Carter's National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski rightly believes that Chinese leadership is not inclined to challenge the US militarily because China's phenomenal economic growth is contingent upon good relations with the US, Japan, South Korea, and other trading partners, the US

being the fourth largest trading partner and the source of largest US trade deficit.

In the future, China-US economic disputes may be the main source of tension between the two countries. China's \$500 billion in US dollar reserves could serve as a war chest for the acquisition of American, Canadian and other foreign companies, especially resource and commodity firms. With so much financial resources at their disposal, China's government firms could buy up foreign firms far more easily than their overseas counterparts. The value of the Chinese currency Yuan has already become a bone of contention between the two countries. These are emerging disputes between China and the United States, as China flexes its economic and financial muscles and the United States, facing enormous budget and trade deficits, finding it difficult to challenge. India can only play a marginal role vis a vis China as a global economic power.