

The phenomenal expropriation

Attitude of resignation regrettable

THIS country has been no stranger to illegal and forcible acquisition of land, particularly forest property, since a long time back. But the scourge of expropriation of public land has been the most pronounced in recent years. The parliamentary committee on environment and forest ministry has learnt from an appraisal report submitted by the forest department that as much as 1.88 lakh acre of forest land has been gobbled up by predators in human form, of which only 9,288 acre could be recovered todate. We are in full agreement with the chairman of the committee that this is far from satisfactory.

A senior official of the forest department has stated that some of the large business houses are involved in this heinous grabbing spree along with what they call "people who are influential." Apparently, his observations almost echoed a remark made by none other than the minister of forests himself. In nearly all cases, there is an involvement of influential and powerful people. Our question is: how powerful and influential are these grabbers, more powerful than the administration itself? If the answer is yes, if the custodians of public property abdicate before the thugs and thereby prove less powerful than the predators, then what remains of their raison d'être?

It is our observation that there is an unmistakable pattern to all kinds of land grabbing, be it in urban areas or rural, whether it's encroachment of river banks or filling up of water bodies for building housing complexes or setting up commercial structures. According to the officials of the department concerned, whenever a move is made to free land from a grabber, the latter would promptly produce false documents followed by court injunctions. So, there is nexus or collusion between fake stakeholders without breaking which no headway can be made in curbing land grabbing.

We suggest a two-pronged measure to solve the huge problem of expropriation in a land-short country: the short term one aimed at vastly improving the rate of recovery of the already grabbed land and the longer-term one designed to prevent any further grabbing of land. To this end, the government should set up a high-powered committee to oversee the current recovery operations and intervene where necessary to make these yield results. For a long term success, the district forest offices need to be further empowered and equipped. Let us not forget, what is at stake is the future of millions of our compatriots for decades to come.

BGMEA crash programme

We want it fail-safe

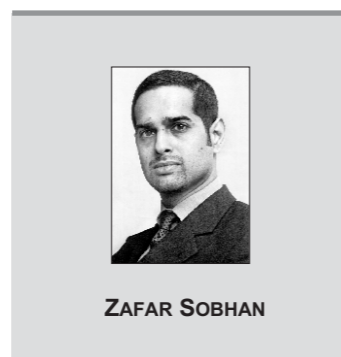
THE Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) has started a serious programme, by the look of it, to prevent accidents taking place in garment factories. They realise that not only the mishaps have taken a heavy toll of human lives and badly tarnished the image of the garment industry but have also brought the country to disrepute in the outside world. The sign of determination on their part to change things around will be as good as its translation into reality.

Some BGMEA inspection teams have found a number of garment factories in and around the city to be highly vulnerable to mishaps. The organisation has also instructed owners to have at least two exits to a factory in forty-five days to avert stampede deaths. Furthermore, they have also directed the management not to keep the factory gates closed when the workers are inside and working. We have witnessed how death tolls in accidents rose sharply as the workers remained trapped inside factories with closed gates.

At long last, the apex body is showing signs of waking up to the need for ensuring the safety of workers. But we believe things have to improve in many areas. Though fire has been identified as the main danger, following the KTS textiles tragedy in Chittagong, building collapse is a source of great concern, too. The workers' safety is greatly compromised by poorly installed electric lines. Finally, the workers are not trained in evacuation drill to be responding with a quick reflex to an emergency situation.

The BGMEA must act and demonstrate that it is going to take some comprehensive measures for creating safe working conditions in the factories. The point is relevant because criminal neglect of workers' safety led to hundreds of casualties in the sector in recent times. So people might just not be convinced that a real change is going to take place unless the BGMEA has made sure that its moves and drives wouldn't turn out to be seasonal, likely to vanish when the dusts will have settled before another series of accidents overtook us.

Ready for prime time?



ZAFAR SOBHAN

THE BBC World debate: Bangladesh -- Can Democracy Deliver? which was shot this week and will be aired in eight days, essentially introduces Bangladesh and our socio-political tensions to an international television audience for the first time. I wonder what the world will think of our debut and what it will make of the two political parties who were on display.

The BNP were represented by Barrister Najmul Huda and the AL by Saber Hossain Chowdhury, with award-winning film-maker Tareque Masud on hand to show a side of Bangladesh beyond the binary political divide.

Somewhat oddly, perhaps, the producers also elected to link to a studio in London via satellite, where the panel consisted of my boss, Mahfuz Anam, and Baroness Uddin, the Bangladeshi-born British peer.

I have to say that I didn't really see the point of having the London hook-up. Mr. Anam could easily have been accommodated in Dhaka, and Baroness Uddin, while serviceable, was hardly indispensable to the proceedings.

Indeed, the most galling part of the program was the London studio audience of 20-something Bangladeshi-Brits who were asked to chime in periodically, and unsurprisingly had very little of

STRAIGHT TALK

The face-off which most people in Bangladesh will want to see, and that I suspect that most people around the world will find most interesting, is the one between Najmul Huda and Saber Hossain Chowdhury. For most of the people around the world, this is probably the first time they will see representatives from the two major Bangladeshi political parties square off, and it is hard to believe that they will not form some kind of an opinion based at least in part on what they see.

interest or insight to add to the discussion.

The debate was preceded by a somewhat tedious 14-minute documentary (hopefully this will be edited drastically when the show is aired) of one of the afore-mentioned callow youths' trip to Bangladesh, where he wanders around wide-eyed and marvels at the fact that the boys and girls mix freely whereas his sisters in London wear hijab.

Interesting enough, I suppose. But actually it is an interesting point about the Bangladeshi community in London, not an interesting point about Bangladesh, that was theoretically the focus of the show.

I think that it is a little off that BBC World felt the need to construct Bangladesh through the eyes of the Bangladeshi diaspora community in order to make the show compelling to a world-wide audience.

I suspect this is a mistake. The show is being broadcast on BBC World not BBC 1 or BBC 2, and I cannot imagine that too many of the 270 million homes that the service boasts of reaching will be much interested in some inarticulate 20 year-old Bangladeshi-Brit's opinion on Bangladesh, any more than they would be in some young Bolivian-Brit's take on the recent election of Evo Morales.

But let us not quibble too much. The fact that, by virtue of this

debate, the world will get some kind of a picture of Bangladesh, however partial, is surely a good thing, though I remain very interested to see what kind of a picture is ultimately going to be portrayed after the 105 minutes of shooting is edited down to 45.

The debate itself was a little uneven, as this kind of five-cornered thing was bound to be. I thought that the number of participants and constant cutting from Dhaka to London kept things a little off the boil. The moderator, Stephen Sackur of HARDtalk fame, did a good job of keeping things tight, but the format and time constraints meant that it was hard to get a substantive debate going.

Nevertheless, it was a fascinating show and should make for an engrossing 45 minutes of television.

The primary target audience is BBC World viewers around the world, and for me the most interesting consideration is what those with only a passing knowledge of Bangladesh will take away from the experience.

The audience will have seen an articulate newspaper editor and film-maker, both speaking sense. I am not sure of what they would make of Baroness Uddin and the 20-somethings, but since they were all actually British and not Bangladeshi, the impression they

created is not of too much concern to me.

But the face-off which most people in Bangladesh will want to see, and that I suspect that most people around the world will find most interesting, is the one between Najmul Huda and Saber Hossain Chowdhury.

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If this is the case, then, to be perfectly frank, I have to say that I found Najmul Huda an odd choice on the part of the BNP, and wondered whether someone else, perhaps Moudud Ahmed, might not have done better.

Throughout the debate, Mr. Huda, looking ill-at-ease and irritable, gave a remarkable series of unintentionally self-incriminatory responses that as often as not reduced the studio audience to derisive laughter. For instance, his claim that the ACC could not function properly because it was too busy responding to busy-body journalists was one such fine moment of inadvertent comedy.

If one wished to be charitable, Mr. Huda's most unfortunate sound-

bite: "the aim of politics is power" should perhaps be taken as a statement of malevolence, but it couldn't have sounded encouraging to anyone's ears.

Mr. Chowdhury, on the other hand, turned out to be a quite good choice on the part of the AL. There is little question that he is one of the smartest and most articulate of the party leaders and he presented himself as very smooth and reasonable, which played well in contrast to Mr. Huda's rather more blustering and ill-tempered demeanour.

My sense is that someone tuning into Bangladeshi politics for the first time would be a little taken aback that a cabinet minister would be so incoherent and would have been impressed with Mr. Chowdhury's assured performance.

Of course, whether the program will have any impact beyond our shores in terms of how people view the socio-political situation in Bangladesh remains to be seen.

It may well not, but I think that it could. I think people around the world are becoming increasingly interested in what is happening here, and I think that there would be some interest in hearing what the two principal sides have to say. I know that I often find BBC World presentations on countries that I don't know much about to be strangely compelling.

As for the response here in Dhaka, that will be harder to gauge. I recommend that everyone watch for themselves on BBC World or NTV and make up their own mind.

It will be very illuminating to see the response inside Bangladesh, and I would be interested to see if a general audience would agree with the consensus among the studio audience that Mr. Chowdhury had the better of the debate.

In the final analysis, it wasn't too

close a call due to Mr. Huda's continual stumbles, such as when Mr. Sackur pushed him into conceding that the electoral alliance with the Jamaat is "a marriage of convenience" and prodded him into the astonishingly revealing statement that: "Ahmadias are not a religion."

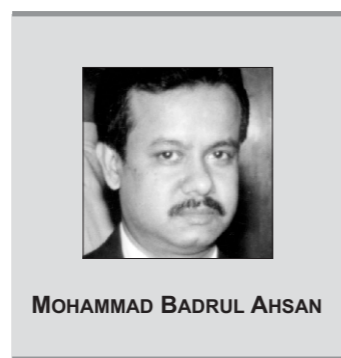
Mr. Chowdhury's toughest moment was when he was asked why the AL complains about rigging whenever it loses an election. He couldn't very well say what he believes: that the elections actually were stolen, without sounding petulant, but he ended up finessing the issue fairly well when Mr. Sackur put him on the spot, saying that this was why it was important to agree to the rules for the coming election ahead of time, so that there could be no crying after the fact.

In the end, the program was like a sushi bar. Not enough to really fill you up, but enough delights here and there to make it a very agreeable experience. I don't know how the program will look after being edited down to 45 minutes, but I know that I am going to be watching to find out. I suggest that you do so too.

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The debate will air on BBC World (television) on April 8 at 6:30pm, and April 9 at 1:10am, 1:10pm, and 11:10 pm; on BBC World Service (radio) on April 9 at 7:00pm and midnight; and on NTV on April 8 at 8:30pm, on April 9 at 4:30pm, April 15 at 3:00pm, and April 16 at 12:15am.

Is Bangladesh blinking?



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

ON March 26 we celebrated our Independence Day. It was the 35th anniversary of our nation to mark 36 years of its freedom. An anniversary is supposed to be the conjoined celebration of two things, celebration of the past as well as celebration of the future. The present sits like a wedge between them, somewhat like a moderator between two sides engaged in a debate. While the anniversary is a ceremony poised in the living moment, the celebration should shoot back and forth in mind like a shuttle weaving tapestry.

In that sense, we have had half the celebration on March 26. We looked back at the past, television stations and newspapers reliving each day of March 1971 through footage, clippings and interviews. All of that was necessary to remind us of what we tend to forget. But necessary also for the future generations, who have no memory of the past and are subject to daily dollops of its contentious versions.

What about the other half -- the future? We need memory in order to make the past relevant for the future just like we need origins to start for destinations. But for thirty-five years

CROSS TALK

China is rising. India is shining. Bangladesh isn't even blinking. Because wrapped in the fanfares of freedom, there is the ringing contradiction of muted slavery. While there is freedom of celebration, we are yet to wrestle for the celebration of freedom. When will it happen? That is what we should have asked on March 26. It should have resounded within the walls of every house, the clamour of every rally, and the sound of every drumbeat.

we have been stammering. For thirty-five years we have been going in circles. We don't talk about the future. We don't know where we are heading.

Instead we remain trapped in the centrifugal forces of politics, repetitive cycles of conspiracy and confrontation, rancour and retribution. We have got the motions, but we are not moving, our mind so busy to sort out the past as if the future doesn't exist. Has anybody talked about the future yet? Has anybody talked about a dream?

It is possible to punch above the weight. A small country with a large population doesn't always have to feel hunkered down. Look at China, look at India, two of the largest populations in the world are now roaring. China has been growing at the rate of 10 per cent for several years. India is growing between 8 to 10 per cent depending on who is talking. Yes, these countries have big geographic areas, but if you look closely, poverty in those countries are equally bad. The majority of their people still live under an income of USD2 per day. Nearly 40 per cent of the world's poor live in India today.

These countries have been thriving not by dint of their natural

resources alone, but because of how they have encouraged foreign investment while exploiting foreign markets. Yes, the global economy works like a paradox. The manufacturing employment in the United States has been falling for many decades, but the average American incomes have risen to be the highest in the world. As the American companies have outsourced goods and services, the American incomes have risen, not fallen.

Princeton University economist Alan Binder, who was the vice chairman of the Federal Reserve's board of governors from 1994 to 1996, finds a new world order evolving within that paradox. Not just manufacturing but a large number of service jobs will go out of the United States to cheaper countries in the coming years. His estimate is that the total number of these jobs offshored could be anywhere between 42 and 56 millions.

In that new world order things are already happening. India is shining. China is rising. What about Bangladesh? Are we at least blinking? We missed the boat in the past. But are we ready next time it is around? Not until we sort out the differences. Not until we change our

image in the world. China is criticized for its human rights violations. Nearly a fifth of the Indian Parliament members have been accused of crimes, including embezzlement, rape and murder. The United States has been the world's leading prison-state per capita for the last 25 years, holding about a half million more prisoners than China; even though China is four times its population.

Yet Bangladesh has been branded as the most corrupt nation in the world. On March 26, we had illuminations, parades, music, song, dance and rhetoric. But did we talk about this perception? Did we talk about how to break out of this humiliating stereotype? We held candle-light vigil for the martyrs. We remembered the past. But why is past important if we don't look into the future? Have we been able to make that connection on the 35th anniversary of our independence?

No, surely not. Rather, the celebration looked like two different events, one for the government, and one for the opposition. A day like this should unite the nation. That is true respect for the martyrs. That is true appreciation for those who laid down their lives so that we could

have freedom. On March 26, we looked like two nations, each spiteful of another. It was a boring business, somewhat morose and disturbing, shrouded in the pathetic despair of jubilation in a divided home.

Don't we ever wonder what is there to celebrate? How is it necessary to remember when it happened, if why it happened is forgotten? Perhaps there has been great deal of misunderstanding about freedom, and the anniversary is a mere celebration of that misunderstanding. Once again, it's all about power and wealth, hands changing but not the grip. Once again, the exploitation, the abuse, the oppression, feudal lords replaced by businessmen, monarchy replaced by dynastic ambitions, foreign domination replaced by homegrown exploitation.

Much of that happens in other countries as well: corruption, oppression, exploitation, lying and looting. A polity is like the human body that, from time to time, is attacked by diseases and infections. But we have done away with the immune system altogether. Did that worry us on March 26? Did it bother anybody that we all look alike in the glow of greed?

For 35 years we have used our freedom to get greedy, our minds focused on nothing but accumulation of wealth without realising how it has changed the way we look at things. Is freedom all about earning and spending? Yes, to a large extent it is. People must be given the freedom of choice and that has a lot to do with cash in the pocket. But, how much cash do we need? Not everybody in the world can have

that kind of money. Not even in an increasingly affluent world which had 140 billionaires 20 years ago, 476 billionaires 3 years ago and 793 billionaires in 2006.

A nation can't thrive on wealth alone. It must promote welfare and wellbeing. Did we talk about these things on March 26? Did we talk about soaring prices and load shedding? Did we talk about growing drug addiction and moral erosion? Did we talk about outbreak of AIDS? Did we talk about the growing threat of Avian Flu, depleting layers of subsoil water, and risk of earthquake? There were floats and rallies to demonstrate success. There were outcries and contentions to embody failure. The freedom looked like fracas. Independence looked internecine.

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That call goes to everybody.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

OPINION

Partial formalisation of informal income for good governance

MD. ABDUR ROUF

GOVERNMENT is often seen as the mechanism of pulling back the strings of society. Through formulation, adoption and implementation of laws and rules government controls all aspects of people's lifethere laws and rules are sometimes perceived to be in favour of progress. Therefore, a dictum says 'least government is the best government'.

In every society, be it primitive or most modern, there are required some sort of regulations and implementation of to keep the society under order. Regulations are formulated and implemented by some sort of mechanisms called government. Till today, government is an indispensable mechanism; in spite of having widespread criticisms, mankind cannot do away with it. The functioning of government is called governance. In every society there is government and governance in any form.

Government functions with the help of an all-pervasive mechanism called bureaucracy. Bureaucracy is often perceived to be corrupt and inefficient. In Bangladesh, it is more so. For the fifth consecutive year, Bangladesh has topped the list of corrupt countries of the world. Corruption has become endemic and synonymous to bureaucracy. In many countries of the world bureaucracy has undergone drastic changes. It has been made service-oriented and people-friendly. But in our country, bureaucracy has not yet been able to shed off a part of its vices. There must be a way out. Newly developed ideas in the field need to be adopted or new ideas need to be formed, adopted and implemented for bringing reforms and changes in bureaucracy that can ensure good governance leading to much-sought-after social progress.

Behind every consequence there lie causes. There is an argument that public servants in

Bangladesh are poorly paid. Government of Bangladesh does not have financial ability to provide the public servants reasonable pay. So, many of them become compelled to resort to corruption to meet their needs. Public servants cannot run decent life with poor pay. Such state of affairs is the root cause of corruption and inefficiency in our bureaucracy. Providing the civil servants reasonable pay with significant raise in domestic resource mobilisation is a near impossibility; resources from donors have become scarce and costly. But without providing reasonable pay to the public servants, good services cannot be expected from them. Only good pay, motivation and difficult environment for corruption can ensure good governance in Bangladesh. Good pay stands in the fore. The best alternative to pay the public servants reasonable remuneration appears to be partial formalisation of informal income.

Measures so far to stop the practice of underhand financial transactions have not been effective. It is better needs to root out the cause rather than going for a symptomatic treatment. With prevailing practice of corruption, a portion of service-takers are getting it at high cost but majority of them remain unserved stark manifestation of bad governance. That informal financial transactions are being conducted it is in everybody's knowledge it cannot be stopped but the resultant consequence is that overwhelming majority of the clients are deprived of the services they deserve from the public servants. Under these circumstances, if a portion of the informal income is formalised and consequently if all the clients get proper services, it stands in the benefit of all. Then, why not going for the option of partial formalisation of informal income when we do not have any feasible alternative around?

If informal income is partially

formalised, people will require paying less than they would have otherwise paid but they will receive more services. The public servants will be glad to provide more services because they will receive much more income in fair way than they would have received previously, as salary. This receipt may not be equal to the previous total receipt in fair and unfair way, yet they will be pleased because the receipt is fair, involving no hassle and nuisance and above all risk. Without making an end to the harsh reality of poor payment, any measure to curb corruption and bring good governance in Bangladesh is destined to be ineffective, if not total failure, causing more problems other than solving them, as evident from the persistence of corruption in spite of undertaking repeated administrative reform programmes. If a portion of the underhand financial transactions is legalised and adoption of unfair means by the public servants is

made difficult, tremendous positive results shall be reflected in governance. Good governance is the key to ensure a happy and prosperous society.

With good payment to the civil servants adoption of unfair means by them need to be made difficult. There are several categories of civil servants. Some civil servants think that they will work hard and if they get reasonable pay in return they will not resort to any unfair means, thus they will have a trouble-free life. There are some civil servants who want to make money desperately to spend in social activities or in running elections to build political career. The working environment needs to be reshaped in the manner where such eccentric intentions cannot thrive. Politics is for the politicians and social activities are for the philanthropists. A civil servant trying to become a politician or a philanthropist should not be there. Because in his workplace rather abusing his authority he

would be doing favour to someone who does not deserve a favour and disfavour to someone who deserves a favour or at least justice. If payment is good a large number of civil servants who resort to corruption out of sheer need will give up corruption and opt for a trouble-free life. They will be required to be motivated to provide best of services to the clients. Thus, a good corporate culture can be developed. The small portion of the civil servants desirous of even doing corruption for accumulating lots of money will find it difficult to do it in new working environment and therefore, they will either give up their ambition or give up the service both stand positive for bringing good governance in the country.

The option of partial formalisation of informal income in bureaucracy needs to be given serious thought to bring changes in governance finding no other feasible alternative around to significantly

raise the pay of the public servants. It is better that in an office a chief starts this practice motivating his subordinates. He will require finding out the points in his office where there are informal transactions. He will require devising strategies to partially legalize it. It would be difficult in our culture that the highest policy makers are convinced and rules and regulations are framed to start the process. Moreover, this practice will require different strategies in different offices because the sources and flow of informal income varies from one office to another. Therefore, it would rather require task-based, instant managerial techniques rather than pre-formulated rules and regulations. Changes need to be initiated from somewhere to rebuild the society, as we want.

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