

Thoughts on food sufficiency

Overcome hunger and malnutrition

FULL marks to farmers of the country. They have raised food production to a level where critical dependence on import, on a year-to-year basis, is history now. The farmers have done their job. Have we?

Just because there is no famine, except for the seasonal rice scarcity in pockets of the country's northern region in winter, we are lolling over a false belief that there aren't any food problems as such. Actually, we need to demystify the notion that output increase per se means adequate food to eat, enough intake of calories and ingesting of the required nutrients for body nourishment, faculty growth and enhanced energy levels.

The hard truth is there are serious issues of starvation, underfeeding and malnutrition. Some statistics cited at the WFP-Daily Star roundtable on "What more can we do to reduce hunger and malnutrition", basically underscored the jobs cut out for the planners, government, opposition, NGOs and relevant international agencies. There is chronic malnutrition among children; their physical and mental growth between birth and first three years in particular is severely stunted. Are we not looking to generations enfeebled bodily and mentally?

Eight million children below five years are underweight. Infant mortality rate is 56 per thousand, but if we are to meet MDG goal it has to be brought down to 32.

Ninety-six per cent of our people miss out on standard calorie intake and 60 million go to bed haunted by food insecurity.

Another point. Our agricultural success is largely rice-based. Healthy diet with protein, even lentil, cannot be afforded by teeming millions famished on one meal a day.

Malnutrition comes in lethal doses with poor sanitation, squalor and acute potable water deficits, ironically in a country watered by 56 rivers. Our poverty is exacting too heavy a price from the future of the nation. That's where the alleviation measures need concentrating to make a difference.

The bottomline is as well as doing well in certain areas we have fallen into a trap of self-deceiving complacency. Unless we get out of it, sustainable success will elude us.

UNHR council membership

Let us live up to it

WE rejoice at the news that Bangladesh has been taken aboard the 47-member Human Rights Council. The council's first election was held at the UN General Assembly in New York on Tuesday.

It is a scintillating victory for Bangladesh because among the 13 elected Asian countries Bangladesh secured the third place bagging nearly as many votes as India and Indonesia did.

We look at this triumph of Bangladesh and Bangladeshis as a recognition of the democratic pursuit in Bangladesh for the last fifteen years substantiated by three successful free and fair elections. This prestigious position definitely comes with added responsibilities in that whatever Bangladesh does from here on in terms of protection of human rights at home will be in fuller glare of the international community more than ever before.

It's a new challenge and becomes more daunting as our track record as far as human rights protection is concerned is not above board with interminable infringement on basic rights, particularly extra-judicial killing by Rab and police in by-called "crossfire".

Therefore, while we cheer our new recognition and position, we must not at the same time be oblivious of the state of human rights in the country. This new position brings forth the obligation to deepen our commitment to better the situation through establishing the rule of law, ensuring transparency and accountability in every sphere of governance, and creating an environment of mutual trust and respect for each other.

Despite several commitments with regard to establishing the Human Rights Commission in the country its continuing absence does not augur well as far as uplift of our image is concerned.

We feel no time is better than now to establish this commission to make democracy more meaningful and effective. It goes without saying that in terms of human rights we should have been well ahead of many other countries by now.

STANDING COMMITTEES ON MINISTRIES

Can reporting to the House be made obligatory?

KIBRIA MAZUMDAR

THERE is a popular debate among persons, well aware of parliamentary procedures, on whether it is mandatory for the Standing Committees on Ministries to report to the House.

Some of them can say, of course, it is mandatory for each Standing Committee. While many of them may disagree on the logic that the Rule is somewhere specific but somewhere not. As the Rules clearly state some committees such as (a) Select Committee on Bills (Rule 228), (b) Committee on Petitions (Rule 232), (c) Committee on Public Accounts (Rule 233), (d) Committee on Public Undertakings (Rule 238), (e) Committee on Privileges (Rule 241), (f) Committee on Government Assurances (Rule 244), (g) Committee on Rules of

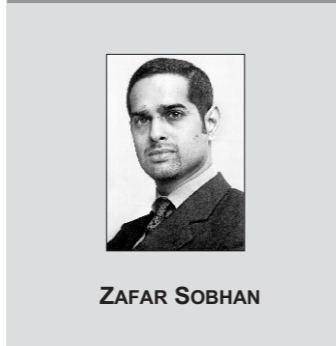
Procedure (Rule 265) shall report to the House. But Committee on Estimates (Rule 235 & 237) which may report to the House though it is not obligatory. And none of the Rules specifically mentions that Standing Committees on Ministries shall have to report to the House.

However, reporting to the House may be a healthy practice. But to make Standing Committees on Ministries report to the House obligatory has to be clearly stipulated in the related Rules. In this regard let us go back to 22nd of July, 1974 when the Rules of Procedure of the Parliament became effective. As per Rule 246 of that time, it was clearly stipulated that each new Parliament as soon as possible appoint 11 Standing Committees such as on (1) Transport and Communications; (2) Food and Agriculture; (3) Flood Control,

Water Resources, Irrigation, etc; (4) Education, Cultural Affairs and Sports; (5) Labour and Social Welfare; (6) Jute, Jute Products and Jute Trade; (7) Local Government and Co-operatives; (8) Health and Family Planning; (9) Trade and Commerce; (10) Forests, Fisheries and Livestock; and (11) Industries, to examine any matter referred to it by the Parliament under the provision of Article 76 of the Constitution. As per the then Rule 248 the prime responsibilities of each such Committee were to examine any Bill or other matter that may be referred to it by the Parliament. That the responsibility of the Committee was to prepare report on Bills after scrutiny. As regards the Bill, the Committee report was required for the resolution of the House.

Turning a blind eye to abuse

STRAIGHT TALK



ZAFAR SOBHAN

This is elementary public policy. It is both the right thing to do morally and in the national interest. Finally, it is a question of national pride. We should be ashamed that we permit our fellow countrymen and women struggling hard to earn an honest wage to be exploited and treated worse than farm animals. But when has this government ever cared about doing the right thing, acting in the national interest, or protecting our national pride?

problem that the government has done absolutely nothing to address.

There are some four million Bangladeshis working outside the country, repatriating over \$4 billion dollars a year. In fact, since much remittance of foreign exchange is done through unofficial channels, the actual figure is certainly even higher. These workers are the unsung heroes of our economy and without their input the country would grind to a halt.

The question is: what do we do for them in return?

The shameful answer is that we do virtually nothing for them. The Bangladesh mission in Jordan has done nothing to ease the plight of the thousands of Bangladeshis workers in the country, and in this it is in good company: no Bangladeshis mission overseas has seen fit to ensure the rights and welfare of expatriate Bangladeshis workers or even thinks of their welfare as any kind of priority.

The ministry of expatriate welfare and overseas employment and the

foreign ministry were not even aware of the report until it was brought to their attention by the media, and both ministries are evidently less well-informed and concerned about the welfare of Bangladeshis working abroad than a US-based international labour rights organization.

As always, the reasons behind the government's shameful neglect of four million of its citizens are as predictable as they are unacceptable.

The first and perhaps most poignant reason is that the government has simply never shown much interest in the welfare of its citizenry and so we should not be surprised to find that its treatment of Bangladeshis working overseas is no exception.

The second reason, that follows from the first, is that our overseas labour force is made up, almost by definition, of working class Bangladeshis who come from the lower strata of society, with no power, influence, or connections, and they are thus even more likely to fall

between the cracks and have their interests ignored by the government.

The third reason is that the exploitation of the overseas workers starts with the manpower agencies here in Bangladesh who charge extortionate rates to send people abroad and collude with the overseas employers to exploit the workers in every imaginable way.

Thus some of the benefits of this latter-day slave trade are reaped by highly influential constituencies here in Bangladesh and their partners in the corridors of power, and these people are happy to continue to make millions off the misery of their fellow citizens.

The final reason why the plight of our overseas workers has gone unmentioned officially is that the government remains anxious to keep up good relations with some of the countries such as Saudi Arabia or Kuwait or Malaysia where the reports of abuse have been the worst.

The prime minister was in Kuwait recently looking for a favourable rate

for fuel imports. Did she bring up the issue of the rights and welfare of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Kuwait while she was there? I am guessing not.

After all, we can't have something as insignificant as the rights and welfare of Bangladeshi workers get in the way of cheap fuel and good relations with our Muslim brothers.

This is disgraceful. The Bangladeshis working overseas are citizens of this country and have a right to expect that their government will look out for their interests. There are some four million of them and another quarter million is added to their number every year. It is unconscionable that the government would turn a blind eye to the plight of what amounts to two and a half percent of the population.

If the government is not moved by the humanitarian argument for improving the welfare of our overseas workers, surely it should be more responsive to the cold, hard, practical benefits to the country of protecting them.

After all, these men and women repatriate close to ten percent of GDP back to the economy despite the fact that they are routinely cheated by both manpower agencies and their employers. Ensuring that they are paid a fair wage or even the wage that they are contractually entitled to would massively increase the amount of money remitted back to the country.

There is a simple fix: all that is needed, as ever, is the political will. The ministry for expatriate welfare must be empowered and all Bangladeshi missions abroad must make the welfare of Bangladeshi workers priority number one.

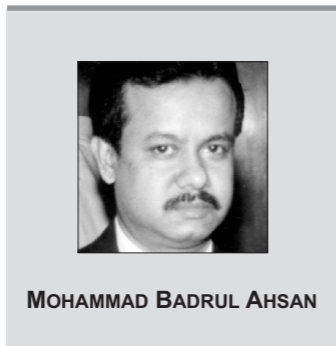
Right now, the ministry is among the most useless in the country (which is saying something), and does nothing whatsoever for the millions supposedly under its care, and the efforts of our foreign missions are similarly disgraceful.

This is elementary public policy. It is both the right thing to do morally and in the national interest. Finally, it is a question of national pride. We should be ashamed that we permit our fellow countrymen and women struggling hard to earn an honest wage to be exploited and treated worse than farm animals.

But when has this government ever cared about doing the right thing, acting in the national interest, or protecting our national pride?

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

Hiding hands



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

The imam held his hands in prayer, talking to god under his breath. How was it fair that one must be treated with so much cruelty for a trivial offence? This man on the ground was writhing in pain, his body ravaged by a thousand wounds because he had stolen a handful of rice and two skinny fowls. Why should be it a crime to steal so little if the world was ruled by people who have stolen much more?

soiled by dirt and blood, lower ones by incontinence that clearly showed that there was no decency in the cruelty of men.

The village guards abruptly picked up the man from the ground and placed him erect before the village council. The man reeled like a reed in the wind, his body wrecked by starvation, pain, and fatigue. The guards whacked him with a few blows to get a confession out of him. Then the elders took turn on him, striking him with sticks and rods crashing down on his back and waist. He shrieked in pain at the top of his voice, begging for mercy for as long as he stayed on his feet, then fell down and rolled on the ground, and his tormentors stomped him like a rodent at their feet.

A woman in the crowd fainted from time to time, and her little son mournfully hugged his mother as she moaned whenever the fallen man yelled in pain. The ring of crowd expanded and shrank depending on

CROSS TALK

how the guards and the councilmen manoeuvred to strike the man on the ground. The village imam stood up and shook his head, while making for the door and adjusting his cap. He stepped out of the mosque and stood on the steps, one leg folded like a brooding crane to fix the shoe around his foot.

Somebody shouted from the crowd, asking for some good strokes in the joints so that the man would feel the pain in his bones. Others cheered the beating, screaming for more until the body turned into pulp from head to toe. The imam waded his way through the crowd to take a close look at the centre of this wrath. He saw a bundle of flesh curled up like a foetus in the womb, swollen face and battered limbs soiled with earth like a rag-doll after it had been dragged in the mud. He looked around him and saw familiar faces, devout men who were standing inside the mosque only moments ago in their surrender

to god.

Then he raised his hand to wave at the man who was standing over the prostrate body brandishing a piece of roughly hewn log in his hand. The man paid no attention to the imam and bore down on the listless body again and again. The feeble sound of a piercing cry filled the air, and then one could hear nothing but the thudding noise as if the stick was repeatedly hitting on a heavy sack.

The imam held his hands in prayer, talking to god under his breath. How was it fair that one must be treated with so much cruelty for a trivial offence? This man on the ground was writhing in pain, his body ravaged by a thousand wounds because he had stolen a handful of rice and two skinny fowls. Why should be it a crime to steal so little if the world was ruled by people who have stolen much more?

In all these years that he grew old, his hoary hairs, loose skin, and

wretched bones have witnessed the riddles of life which he could not resolve. It is said in the holy book that the virtuous would be rewarded in the next life, and the vicious would prevail in this. The biggest riddle is the fate of man that he must live in the shifting sand of right and wrong, his life continuously hurled to erase what is etched, forever seeking his dream in the nightmare, struggling to live against the menace of death.

This poor thing was now spread-eagled on the ground as the village guards tried to change his clothes, while children in the crowd pinched their nose with one hand and brushed the other to drive away the odour. The woman in the crowd was sobbing hard, drawing her son into her bosom so that he could not watch the humiliation of a man who was his father.

The man was being prepared for the final round. He would be taken for a walk of shame in the village before he was handed over to the police. One of the guards held his head, while another shaved it with the brisk strokes of a razor. Then a village elder poured dyes on the man as the liquids rolled down and stained his face.

Once the clown was successfully made up - clothes torn, hairs shaved, skin ripped, face swollen, blood dripping from his many wounds, and a string of shoes hung around his neck -- the guards picked him up and stretched his body like a

spring, forcing him to limp like a quarry bruised in the chase. Children jeered at him along the way and elders threw blows and spat him in the face. The woman in the crowd fainted again as her son screamed for help.

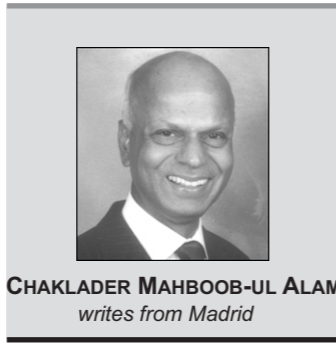
The imam looked at the sky, bright and azure in the afternoon light. Prophets, messiahs and god-fearing men have walked upon this earth. Reformers and revolutionaries have shed their blood. Poets and bards have praised virtue and denounced vice. The earth has shuffled in earthquakes, tornados, cyclones and storms, continents shifted, islands drifted, curtains lifted, but nothing has changed.

In the distant meadow, they were still dragging that man, men, women and children trailing him in the formation of a reptile slouching into the shadows. That is when an unpleasant thought crossed his mind. The man who has built this mosque had earned his fortune in the black market. The imam looked at his hands and wondered if he had been hiding his face behind them for all these years. This is god's world, the imam muttered, while the uproar of voices faded in the wind.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

Iran and the NPT

LETTER FROM EUROPE



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM writes from Madrid

As far as Iran is concerned, it is possible that the ultimate goal of its leaders is to build a bomb. But if a country is being branded continuously by the world's only superpower as its worst enemy, constantly threatened with pre-emptive strikes, spied upon twenty-four hours a day by satellite, and is surrounded by enemy forces, can we really blame that country for trying to develop nuclear bombs as an ultimate deterrent?

possess nuclear weapons. What it really does is to consolidate the monopolistic position of the existing nuclear powers while branding any other country trying to develop nuclear technology as a virtual outlaw. India, Pakistan, and Israel, who later developed nuclear weapons, declined to sign the agreement. However, they are now considered as unofficial members of the club.

Although the treaty provides for a gradual elimination of the existing stock of nuclear weapons, nothing significant has been done to implement this provision. Instead, over the years, the US has gone on exploring a range of new and more sophisticated nuclear weapons while preaching non-proliferation to others. The treaty also provides for the peaceful uses of atomic energy.

Now the US is busy trying to generate public hysteria in the US in

favour of a pre-emptive strike against Iran. Why? In 1953, the US overthrew the democratically elected government of Mossadegh, who had nationalised Iran's oil fields in 1951. The Americans then brought the Shah back from exile. The Shah paid the favour back by dividing up Iranian oil production mainly among the American and British oil companies, which led to the beginning of an intense anti-American feeling among the Iranians.

The Shah was overthrown in 1979, and since then, despite American arms sales worth billions of dollars to Iran during the Iran-Iraq war, mutual distrust between the US and Iran has only deepened further. It is in this context that one must examine the reaction of the US to Iran's nuclear projects. It does not consider Iran as a nation which can

be trusted with nuclear technology.

Actually, Bush wants to rewrite the main provisions of the treaty without renegotiating them. He knows that Iran has not breached the NPT. He realises that under the treaty, Iran can develop nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. He is not even against proliferation of nuclear weapons as demonstrated by his recent visit to India and the US clandestine support to Israel in the development of nuclear weapons which again was in clear violation of the NPT.

What Bush wants is to maintain American hegemony in the world and to exercise his "divine right" to decide which country can develop nuclear technology and which cannot. Clearly Bush feels that Iran is not entitled to do it.

The recently published National Security Strategy of the US insists

on stopping Iran's nuclear program at any cost. Then it warns Iran that pre-emptive strikes continue to occupy a central position in America's global strategy. According to Seymour Hersh of The New Yorker, American Special Forces have already been deployed inside Iran and are now engaged in subversive activities among Iran's ethnic minorities.

According to some reports, even the use of tactical nuclear weapons against Iran -- which we should remind everybody is a non-nuclear nation -- is being considered by Bush. If America goes ahead with its plan and attacks Iran, this would confirm most signatories' conviction that only nuclear deterrents can save them from American invasions. This would mean the end of the NPT.

Unfortunately, the NPT has now become part of a political game. The only way to make the NPT more effective would be to make it more equitable. The existing nuclear powers must show their sincerity by stopping further research in this field, by being more transparent about their stock of nuclear weapons, creating nuclear free zones in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Above all, the US being the sole surviving super-power and owner of

the largest stock of nuclear weapons must stop threatening non-nuclear nations with pre-emptive strikes. These threats are counter-productive in the long run because they create insecurity among small nations, which then feel compelled to acquire nuclear weapons.

As far as Iran is concerned, it is possible that the ultimate goal of its leaders is to build a bomb. But if a country is being branded continuously by the world's only superpower as its worst enemy, constantly threatened with pre-emptive strikes, spied upon twenty-four hours a day by satellite, and is surrounded by enemy forces, can we really blame that country for trying to develop nuclear bombs as an ultimate deterrent?

Chaklader Mahboob-ul Alam writes from Madrid.

ity to the House will be obstructed.

There is an observation that if the executing agency feels that some of the recommendations made by the Committee cannot be considered due to some legal bindings, policy implications, shortage of budgetary allocations or lack of public interest, then it can come back to the Committee again and clearly describe the limitations. Thereafter if it is deemed to the Committee that the recommendation on its own requires resolution of the House for implementation, then it can be brought to the notice of the House and the report regarding the issue can be discussed in the House.

The issue, how often a Committee may report to the House, in my observation should not be confined within a timeframe; the necessity will determine the time. And it should be the prerogative

of the Committee how often it should report to the House.

As the Parliament and its Committees are guided by the Rules of Procedure, all concerned with the Committee are duty bound to follow that. However, it may be concluded that Rule 248 of the Rules of Procedure can be modified by adding the provision for reporting.

Kibria Mazumdar is Committee Officer, Bangladesh Parliament Secretariat.