

## EC's procrastination

Time still wasted in preparing credible voter list

Along last the chief election commissioner (CEC) has agreed to abide by the Supreme Court verdict and update the 2001 voters' list instead of pursuing the project for a new one, on which he has spent valuable money, energy and time. The very fact that he wasted precious 15 days of national time by waiting for the Supreme Court verdict document to reach his office is indication enough of the poor sense of urgency and pace of work at which the Election Commission (EC) is addressing its mandate.

It goes without saying that without an authentic voters' list we cannot have a credible election. But, even in relenting, the CEC apparently shows signs of procrastination. For example, though he has received the copy of the SC verdict on 7 June he announced 12 June as the date for convening a meeting to initiate the process of implementing the SC verdict. Why waste anymore time? Why not hold an emergency meeting on Sunday at the latest? These are the questions exercising the public mind. After all, this is a meeting that is supposed to set the ball rolling about updating the voter list, given the time constraints we have to finish this important job.

His behaviour with the newsmen has been unfortunately dismissive to say the least, little realising that the newsmen would approach him for information about relevant matters and he or his office should be prepared to interact with them in the most forthright manner. The EC has yet to get any system going whereby media could obtain information readily. We note that the CEC seems to be only aware of his constitutional pedigree but remains oblivious of his obligation to the people that his post entails.

By standard definition of self-esteem, the CEC probably would have served the nation better had he made an honourable exit of his own volition. At the very least, he can seize the opportunity to mend his battered image through responding immediately to the SC verdict and starting work on preparing the revised voter list in an authentic and credible manner.

## The ultimate in football

A delectable drift into a dream show

THE eyes of the world's two-thirds of people will be glued to their television sets from today onwards, upto a full month. The curtain is being raised over the World Cup Football Championships for which people waited for four years with bated breath. What was a crude game invented by the Chinese about a century ago has been elevated to a fine art -- a game of high finesse and technique.

Soccer often becomes more than a mere symbol of a game. To the Latin Americans it is almost like a religion; to the Europeans it is a fight for preserving national pride and supremacy, while to the Africans it is a vehicle for vertical ascension, and for the Asians it is still an uphill struggle for gaining a respectable position in the mainstream.

Already the fanfare and the frenzy surrounding the game have reached its peak all over the globe. In our country, you see flags of different participating countries flying high atop private residential buildings and apartments indicating as to who supports which team. Internationalism is here.

There is but a few events in the lives of our people which offer any real, clean entertainment, the World Cup Soccer Championship being the high point of such an entertainment feast in an otherwise drab and daily routine in our lives. We earnestly hope that those in charge of electric supply would do their utmost to keep the power outage at its minimum and preferably none during the specified times of each important game throughout the entire duration of the event. We believe it should be quite possible given well-thought-out strategic planning followed by strict compliance with instructions by all concerned at the field level.

We wish the game all success and let the best team win the coveted cup.

# Overcoming obstacles to food security

## BARE FACTS

Food security at household level is closely linked with income poverty. Thousands of poor households lack adequate purchasing power to consume required food. Available data indicate that about 50 percent of the country's citizens earn less than one US dollar a day. The situation is the worst with the ultra poor comprising the destitute, sick, old and infirm who are not capable of participating in income generating opportunities.



M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

WHILE speaking as chief guest at a roundtable jointly organised by World Food Programme (WFP) and The Daily Star at CIRDP auditorium in Dhaka city on May 10, the Minister for Food and Disaster Management Chowdhury Kamal Ibne Yusuf disclosed that "Bangladesh at the moment produces much more food compared to two decades ago, but still about half of the households are far from being food secure." The disclosure of the minister means that out of a total of 25 plus million (Source: BBS Pocketbook 2002) in the country, 12 million or so households are food insecure. Considering the average size of household 5.18 (Source: Household Income & Expenditure Survey (HIES)-2000, so far the latest), more than 60 million people are far from being food secure.

Food security is basically defined as access by all people at all time to the food need for a healthy life. The challenge of food security in Bangladesh is huge. Food security situation in the country is generally examined in terms of three broad dimensions and these are: (1) availability of food, (2) access to food, and (3) utilisation of food.

Availability of food in the country has three sources: (a) domestic food production, (b) food aid, and (c) imports. Admittedly, Bangladesh has more than doubled its domestic foodgrain (rice and

wheat) production during the last 33 plus years. Foodgrain production in 1971-72 was 100.46 lakh metric tons (MT) which, according to food ministry's source stood at 261.33 lakh MT in 2004-2005. But deduction of 10 percent for seed, feed and waste and HIES calculation of 476 gm as average national per capita per day intake of foodgrain for 140 million people, meant the shortfall of 9 lakh MT.

Food aid and/or imports are the means left open for filling up shortage of domestic foodgrain production. The former has almost dried up and come to 2-3 lakh MT per year. So, the only course that remains open is to import foodgrain in case of shortfall in domestic production.

Livestock, fisheries and vegetables are the other important food items that may supplement the shortfall of foodgrain. But growth in these sub-sectors is far from satisfactory. According to Bangladesh, the cattle population showed an annual growth rate of 0.25 percent between 1960 and 1990 while the human population grew at about 3 percent per year during the same period. The recent growth rate is much lower than the annual rates of growth required to meet the increasing demand for livestock products, specifically milk and meat.

The situation in the fisheries sub-sector is no better. Available data reveal that in Bangladesh freshwater fisheries constitute around 70 percent and marine fisheries including brackish-water

occupy the rest. The production of freshwater fisheries suffers from gradual filling up of many water bodies and the use of pesticide, insecticide etc. in crop fields and thus cannot meet the requirement of a growing population.

Available information suggests that availability of vegetables is only about 1/5th of the recommended requirement of 200gm per person per day.

Availability of foodgrain or even total food does not in itself guarantee food security for households or individuals. Even when aggregate food supplies are adequate, a number of factors may prevent poor households or individuals from having access to required food. These, among others, are:

**Income poverty:** Food security at household level is closely linked with income poverty. Thousands of poor households lack adequate purchasing power to consume required food. Available data indicate that about 50 percent of the country's citizens earn less than one US dollar a day. Income poverty, which causes food insecurity in the households, results mainly from (a) insufficient government and private investment in physical infrastructure; (b) little non-farming activities in rural areas; (c) poor wages of agricultural labourers who, according to labour force survey (LFS) Bangladesh 2002-2003, constitute 51.7 percent of the country's labour force of 15 years and above; (d) seasonal unemployment of agricultural labourers; (e) poor wages of labourers in industries

including readymade garment (RMG); (f) rising inflation that erodes the real income of the poor; and (g) rapid depreciation in the value of taka against dollar and other foreign currencies coupled with syndication of importers and absence of law to protect the rights of the consumers makes imported items, including foodgrain, dearer. Mentionable that around 50 percent of the household income in the country is spent on food.

**Ultra poor incapable of earning:** The situation is the worst with the ultra poor comprising the destitute, sick, old and infirm who are not capable of participating in income generating opportunities. According to the HIES -2000, the ultra poor stood at 20 percent of the population.

**Insufficient food assistance programmes:** There is a declining trend in public food distribution systems (PFDS) that would provide the poor with cash or kind to supplement their food acquisition capacity in order to enable them to have access to necessary food.

Utilisation of food including its nutritional value is another important component of food security. Important findings of various studies on utilisation of food, including utilisation at the household level, are as follows:

**Intra-household food allocation:** One important issue relating to access to and consumption of food is the distribution of food among the members of the households. Even though a household has enough food at its disposal, there is

no guarantee that all individuals in that household have equal access to food. Conventional food intake pattern suggests that women and children have less access to food than adult male members.

**Dietary imbalance:** Dietary imbalance and unavailability of micronutrients are also among the major factors responsible for poor nutritional outcomes. High consumption of cereals, but low intake of edible oils, vegetables and fish result in a low level of absorption of micro-nutrients and a high level anemia and other deficiencies. Chantell Witten, country director of Helen Keller International informed the roundtable that "only four percent of the population here can afford optimum level of food and it means that 96 percent people cannot take food with adequate calorie intake." "The effects of extreme poverty fall mostly on women and children", says the July-2000 report of the Task Force on "Comprehensive Food Security Policy in Bangladesh."

**Storage, processing and cooking practices affecting food utilisation:** Quite often the available and accessed foods are not properly utilised due to loss of volume, quality and hence nutritional values from improper storage, processing and cooking practices. Loss of quantity and quality of grains under government storage is a very common phenomenon. Processing also greatly affects physical and chemical properties of food, having implications for quantity and quality of the avail-

able food consumed. Utilisation of food is also affected by cooking practices. Careless and excessive washing of food items before cooking often cause huge loss of food values. Also, too much of heating often impairs colour, flavour and nutritional value of food.

Experts, researchers and academics, economists and others have suggested, inter alia, the following steps for overcoming obstacles to food security at the national and household levels:

- Promoting food security by sustaining strong growth in domestic production of foodgrains and vegetables.
- Arresting loss of "nearly 235 hectares of arable land every day for increased land usage for commercial, industrial and other purposes."
- Increasing production of non-food crops like fisheries and livestock.
- Raising budgetary allocation for agriculture to the level of its contribution to the ADP.
- Raising incomes of the poor and their capacity to acquire food through employment generation.
- Raising wages of labourers employed in agriculture and industries including RMG.
- Identifying the vulnerable groups within households and design programmes to address their problem of access to food.
- Designing and implementing interventions to promote food security.
- Supporting safety nets for protection against natural disasters.
- Improving cooking practices to protect nutritional value of food.
- Improving access to basic health facilities.
- Promoting partnership among the government, private sector and NGOs.

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## Is it too late to ask?



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IS it too late to ask for some resignations in the last days of the government? There was a rumour in the air that a powerful minister was going to quit. But now he has changed his mind, because the party has worked out a compromise for him. He will stay back for some time and then retire. The sense we get is that he is too tired of politics.

I am talking about more people who may be tired, people who are ready for resignation or withdrawal from politics. But it should be more direct, more respectable, when powerful men will take responsibility for their mistakes or failures and quit. If someone resigns in dire straits, it is actually being booted in disgrace. We are talking about resignation when still there is a choice.

I know it is not easy to make that choice, because power is addictive. But there should be more

dignity in relinquishing power before getting relieved of one's responsibilities or relegated to a less important ministry. Somehow the potent potion of politics destroys personality, and turns politicians into spineless jellyfish. These tigers, who may roar in public meetings, cringe like pussycats when kicked.

Perhaps there is too much at stake to give up power. One loses the protection of the party. Then the familiar world begins to recede. Only way to overcome the powerlessness after power is to stick together with the party colleagues in the hope to regain it. It is some kind of a cult membership, united to stand, divided to stumble. Hang tight or fall flat!

Often, the hanging verges on the pathetic. In the previous government, an army general remained a minister without portfolio until the end. Then he finally resigned from the party, when it looked more like humiliation

than self-respect. We have a repeat example in this government. This time a retired air force man has got the shove, moving from ministry to ministry before becoming a minister without portfolio. This man is a fish of different kettle. He does not mind because everything comes from God. It is just that we could never accept he was God's gift to this nation!

But why not these people resign before they are reduced to such mockery? Lately, couple of ministers complained on television that they could not do their jobs because their hands were tied. What can you say? They could do everything else with both hands free, abuse of power, money making and scheming. Their hands were tied only when it came to serving this country!

In our entire history, one minister has resigned from office. If he were alive, we could ask him to run a few workshops to tell others that

it is more honourable to quit instead of clinging to the job like a torn limb hanging from the skin. It is such a poor sight, such an ugly spectacle of human dignity that public figures who are supposed to uphold the institution of government make travesty of it.

So why not some of them come forward and quit? Why not start with the minister without portfolio, then the ministers who have been shuffled, then the ministers who have been baffled, followed by the failed ones, frustrated ones, disoriented ones, and jilted ones? It would not be a bad idea if the Chief Election Commissioner and his two musketeers also joined them. Frankly, amongst them three, they are the scale model of everything wrong in the government.

Here is the limited offer for those who are listening. Come resign and there will be a place in the hearts of people. The offer is valid until this October, the last day of this govern-

ment in office. But it would be wise to take the offer sooner, before the stock runs out. I mean the stock of goodwill that is still out there, until people lose their patience and refuse to forget and refuse to forgive.

It might sound crazy, but it would be good to see some resignations these days. The powerful people should not wait until they are pushed to the corner, until they are made to feel that they are redundant, disposable like banana peels. It will go a long way to change our politics. It will teach the leaders, it will teach the party, that there is no power like the power of courage to give up power at one's will. Those who regret all their broken vows and the lies they have told, it is their chance for redemption. Cleanse the conscience before time runs out. Lift the burden on your soul.

The Golden Rule from the Axial Age: Do not do to others what you would not do to yourself. In poli-

tics that rule is regularly flouted as one defeats another in order to win. But the real defeat comes in the loss of dignity, when men crawl like insects in the sewage of power, caught like flies in the sticky sink. Who are these people I am urging? Some of them are freedom fighters who risked their lives for a proud country. Many of them are enlightened people, who were once inspired by idealism. All of them, to the best of my knowledge, are parents, who love their families. These are people who have lived for dignity.

If it is too late to ask, so be it. Still there is time to show that the temptation of power does not do away with dignity. It is wishful thinking that anybody would listen to this appeal. But it is a thought nevertheless, which is worth thinking. One by one many of them will become too tired of politics, falling along the wayside or dropped like hot potatoes, no longer useful to the party.

They should do it before it happens, because the most pathetic thing in the world is when hard-earned honour gives way to ribald laughter. Many years of power vanishes in the blink of an eye. What will remain are shame and guilt. No matter what is their excuse to leave politics!

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## OPINION

# Replacement of ministers is no solution

A B M S ZAHUR

REORGANISATION has a very limited positive effect on the efficiency of an organisation. Nothing, however, can be expected in a situation when placement of personnel was not based on efficiency, antecedent or experience. Huge number of ministers cannot bring efficiency or effectiveness. They can only increase revenue expenditure. From the administrative point of view coordination becomes extremely difficult. In any critical decision in regard to a state policy we must not overlook the importance of involvement of all concerned organisations at the implementation stages. To elaborate this point let us discuss, in brief, what is to be done in formulating a national energy policy. First of all, the ministry of energy will prepare a draft policy which is

to be circulated among the ministries concerned like ministry of finance, ministry of agriculture, ministry of industry, ministry of water resources. Once the draft is finalised on accommodating views of the ministries concerned it may be placed before the ECNEC. If the draft is okayed by the ECNEC it should be discussed in the parliament for the sake of transparency. When the policy is formulated the ministry concerned will go for different projects to be prepared in the light of the overall energy policy. At the stage of implementation the authority concerned should be extremely cautious about accepting bids. The authority must not overemphasise the cost factor or political consideration. In the two-envelope system more elaborate should be given to the technical aspect. Examination of the bids must be thorough

**The current crisis of electricity and water cannot be solved within the remaining period of the tenure of alliance government. What may at best be possible is to find fault of some senior officers of the ministry or implementing agencies. This style appears to suit this government. The fact is that there is almost no possibility for redressing our suffering. We shall have to face electricity and water crisis and more disturbances may occur in different places because of sky high prices of essential commodities, labour unrest, deterioration of law and order situation, etc.**

because the quality of the machinery to be installed is much more important than cost factor. Cheap machinery is usually not only inefficient it becomes a constant liability.

In setting up electrical plants the government shouldn't show partisan spirit or sentiment. It must not forget that Bangladesh, being an LDC, has a very limited number of firms who can successfully undertake big projects. If smaller firms are to be encouraged, arrangements can be made for the sub-contracts. With such

arrangements these firms can become efficient in handling bigger projects. It is indeed suicidal (even may be considered as crime) if bidders are accepted in consideration of party or parties' interest. A government can never be efficient if the interest of the country gets less importance to the interest of the party.

In case of ministry of power the role of the state minister is very limited because he is virtually under the control of the PMO. Thus the prime minister should share the responsibility of failure

in the power sector. Otherwise replacement of Iqbal Hussain Mahmood by Anwarul Kabir will be just a cosmetic change to cover up failure.

By ignoring the real importance of generating adequate electricity the government is now facing the crisis for water. Former minister for commerce is now expecting the charge of the ministry of water resources (may be to start new crisis for water throughout Bangladesh) because the present minister of water resources has been shifted to the ministry of

commerce.

During the last four and a half years of four-party alliance government we have not seen any positive result out of reshuffling of portfolios. In case of ministries which have remained unchanged performance can hardly be called satisfactory. However, they are not lagging behind in beating their drums to confuse the common men. The fact is that by changing the portfolios of ministers the prime minister may save the situation. The party(s) in power will have to pay (nobody knows

how much) for the follies, ignorance, arrogance of the ministers and other lawmakers. The tendency to ignore the advice of the media might have led the PM to be misguided. By listening to the recommendations of the media carefully she may understand better the game of the sycophants better. The high command of BNP will not, as we understand appreciate the recent incidents of police atrocity on journalists in Chittagong and BCD's unprovoked attack on journalists in Kushtia. For establishing democracy BNP must increase their tolerance.

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government.

We do not expect that Mr Anwarul Kabir, a low performing minister of the present government will be able to show some competence without the power to take executive decisions. As we understand he will have to work at the behest of the PMO. It is reported he has not been shown door because he happens to be popular in his Sirajganj constituency. Thus all may not be lost for Iqbal. He may be renominated in the next election. The fact is that there is almost no possibility for redressing our suffering. We shall have to face electricity and water crisis and more disturbances may occur in different places because of sky high prices of essential commodities, labour unrest, deterioration of law and order situation, etc.

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