

Voters' right to know

Ensure it to make elections credible

THE full implementation of the High Court (HC) verdict on voters' right to know about candidates submitting papers for contesting elections is a universal demand of the citizens in the country at the moment. This demand stems from the fact that country's constitution has safeguarded people's right to information during holding of elections in order to ensure transparency and accountability. According to Section 111 of the constitution, any verdict of the HC can be treated as a law, and according to Section 112 implementation of the HC verdict is mandatory. Only through holding of free and fair elections can our pledge to strengthen democracy and democratic institutions be fulfilled, and it is the solemn responsibility of the incumbent government and office of the Election Commission (EC) to guarantee that such rights are protected.

It goes without saying that the political system of the country has largely fallen into the clutch of a section of people who have questionable antecedents, and who maintain liaison with criminals to climb the ladders of power through terrorising the voters. These people have already done considerable damage to democracy, social order and country's image in the international arena. This was possible because voters did not have any access to information on the unscrupulous people who got elected by them. But this time voters do not want to make the same mistake. Once they would enjoy the right and have access to full information on candidates, it would become difficult for the black money holders to join politics and plunder the exchequer.

We strongly endorse the citizens' demand for immediate implementation of the HC verdict on voters' right to know. The government and the EC should furnish full particulars of the candidates, such as, their social and educational background, sources of earning, assets and property etc., to ensure that honest and competent people get elected to become lawmakers. No doubt, this would be a step forward towards making democracy meaningful in Bangladesh.

Land grabbing menace

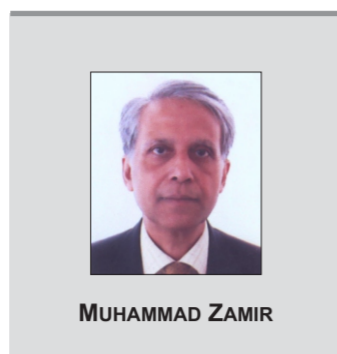
No action plan yet!

WE have on several occasions in the past pointed out many cases of land grabbing by filling up of various water bodies in the capital, including raising illegal structures on both sides of the river Buriganga. But the recent disclosure of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Land Administration that about 20 thousand acres of government khas land being in possession of land grabbers covering the districts of Dhaka, Naryanganj and Gazipur alone, is rather alarming. We stand behind the JS body's resolve to go ahead and disclose the list of the 30 thousand grabbers involved in the act. We understand that the list has already been submitted to the Land Ministry and the Deputy Commissioner's offices in the districts concerned. Apparently, the notorious expropriators have not spared even some forestlands, particularly in Gazipur and Savar.

It is our belief that such grabbing cannot continue without a nexus with the relevant government officials. It is hardly surprising that most of the grabbers come from the richer and influential segment of our population. Whenever the question of recovering such lands from the grip of the illegal occupiers comes up, the administration invariably puts up the excuse that it is unable to effectively deal with the problem due to various legal complications. How come the administration has no such difficulty in uprooting poor people from their homes on grabbed lands in the bustees?

We, therefore, urge the relevant authorities to rise to the occasion and go all out to free these lands from the clutches of the evil occupiers without fear or favour. Land is undoubtedly one of the most precious resources for a country like Bangladesh. Let us leave behind a legacy for our future generation to be proud of. We in the media stand in readiness to help the administration in all possible ways.

WTO issues remain unresolved



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THE ministerial meeting of the G-6 Group of WTO heavyweights, consisting of representatives from Australia, Brazil, the European Union, India, Japan and the United States concluded in Geneva late last month without any agreement or least common denominators.

The ministers tried to thrash out a crucial interim deal on important issues, but failed to achieve any real progress because the key players were not ready to make the required difficult concessions. The meeting had been convened after Pascal Lamy, the WTO Chief, accused diverse vested interests within the developed countries and certain developing countries of thwarting the Doha Round Agenda through differences on how to curb existing trade barriers. This warning from Lamy was issued after it became clear to the WTO Secretariat that WTO governments were likely to miss another host of deadlines through their lack of a clear road-map towards the finding of a suitable mathematical formula for cutting subsidies and tariffs.

It may be recalled that the Doha Round of trade talks was launched in 2001, with the specific purpose of tearing down trade barriers and helping developing economies accelerate growth.

Some progress was achieved last year in the WTO Conference in Hong Kong. However many issues also remained unresolved.

In that meeting, it was agreed that export subsidies, a thorn on the side of international fair trade should be eliminated by the end of 2013. This was a compromise between the 2010 date suggested by Brazil and the USA, and 2014, which fitted better with European Union plans.

In exchange, Brussels wanted an end to export credits and food aid by Washington that were seen as undermining poor farmers. They also demanded tougher

ing out of the meeting in Geneva that although politicians claimed that they were fighting for the protection of European farmers, this was not really correct. Analysts are now accusing that the tariff cuts proposed by the European Commission appears to be directed towards protecting food processors rather than farmers.

Writing on this, Patrick Messerlin, has made some interesting observations. He has

tariff cuts on the currently most protected products and smaller tariff cuts on the currently less protected products. Such rebalancing might boost the gains for European consumers -- especially among the poorest. Messerlin correctly observes that cutting low tariffs (mostly on farm products) by a lesser amount would ensure the support of a vast majority of European farmers, while still opening European agricultural markets. This formula

without forceful US support no deal will be achievable.

The latest round of talks in Geneva has been billed as a way to revive the stalled Doha Round negotiations on harnessing freer trade and to boost growth in poorer countries. This step, at least for now, does not appear to have worked. It has also created greater frustrations among Australia and its Cairns Group partners. It has also become more complex with Lamy's proposals

China is out-competing the poorest countries in Asia, making it harder for them to benefit from trade-opening moves. The United Nations Development Programme, in a report published towards the end of June, has commented that Chinese imports into Bangladesh, Cambodia and other least developed nations were displacing domestic industries such as leather and footwear, wood paper, glass, bicycles and motor-bikes.

The situation has become that much more difficult given the fact that these countries are selling little to China in return. In addition, China is competing directly with their textile exports in western markets.

Fortunately, in the recent past, we have seen gradual recognition of this problem by the Chinese authorities. They have started meaningful talks with Bangladesh trade bodies on identifying products that could be given non-tariff access. China will probably start undertaking such efforts with other poor countries.

Nevertheless, one way out would be to induce China to invest more in countries like Bangladesh. This would counter-balance the adverse balance of trade that is enjoyed by such countries with China.

It is true that the WTO works by consensus and no final deal will be possible unless all member states agree. However, in conclusion, I will not be pessimistic. I believe that all Groups and countries concerned have not failed. They have only gained more negotiating space and also a period for further reflection. Differences can be narrowed down and agreements will eventually emerge. What is required is greater political will.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

rules for state export companies in Canada and Australia. The Hong Kong Conference also decided that export subsidies, particularly for cotton, should be scrapped in 2006. However, it did not immediately tackle domestic support, leaving many African nations, mostly LDCs, very disappointed.

Disagreement had also surfaced in Hong Kong between the EU on one side and the US and Brazil on the other, over the question of market access. US exporters sought a 60 per cent reduction in EU duties on farm produce and Brazil by 54 per cent. EU's proposal, in response fell short of expectations. The EU as a group was willing to go up to 46 per cent reduction, but this was obviously not enough.

This time round, in Geneva, as expected, French farmers once again resisted deeper cuts proposed by the G 20 group. This will further complicate matters.

It was clear from reports com-

pointed out that 'only one-quarter of the 200 or so products that would remain the most protected after the Doha Round are farm products. Among them are surprising items, from cucumbers and gherkins to rice'. It would also appear that the food products that would remain the most protected after Doha, if the European Commission's proposals prevail, will be a hodge-podge of waste products (dog and cat food), products with little trade potential (yoghurt) and certain other goods that may require more of an adjustment from food producers rather than farmers. The intrinsic over-lap in products will also open the door for misclassifications and ultimately corruption.

This continuing debate, partially due to EU inflexibility, might possibly be resolved, according to some, including myself, by Europe replicating in agriculture the negotiating formula used in manufacturing. This will initiate deeper

should be particularly acceptable to French politicians and French farmers.

In Geneva, this time round, it is true that the European Union went further than before in signaling its willingness to make bigger cuts in farm tariffs, but the stand-off between developed and developing countries remained over the issue of cuts in agricultural subsidies.

Matters were also not helped by the fact that the Bush administration today, is under strong political pressure from the US Congress. A domestic deadline is hanging over the USA. On July 1, 2007, the White House is due to lose its special authority from lawmakers to fast-track trade deals. This may subsequently hamper the WTO negotiations if they overrun. The USA appears to have little flexibility to move on farm subsidies, and without this, other jigsaw pieces will not fall into place. This is important because

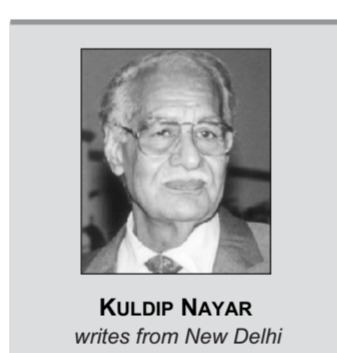
regarding sweeping cuts in industrial tariffs which have been opposed by China, India and Indonesia.

149 members of the WTO have been left with the tough task ahead, of trying to resolve bitter differences within a narrower time frame.

In the meantime, poorer countries like Bangladesh are facing a serious crisis. In Hong Kong, they received a flawed platter. The LDCs were assured that most of their exportable items would be exempt from duties or quotas by rich countries by 2008. However, the hurdle of 3 per cent was placed on LDC goods. I recall that in my earlier column on this subject, I had mentioned that this was bound to affect our key export earners -- textile and leather products.

These measures are already creating problems for us and having repercussions on our trade regime.

Nations of Southeast Asia



KULDEEP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

AROUND this mid-August, the Southeast Asian countries complete their 59 years of independence. I am reminded of former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill's warning when the transfer of power was taking place. He said that the leaders who would head the freed countries are "men of straw of whom no trace will be found after a few years."

How wrong he was. The founders of independent countries will always stay in the mind of their nations: Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru in India, Qauid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan in Pakistan. Sheikh Mujib-ur Rahman and Tajuddin Ahmed were the guiding spirit during the liberation struggle; their names will remain in the annals of Bangladesh. Time will not lessen B.P. Koirala's fight against the monarch of Nepal. Similarly, SWRD Bandaranaike will be remembered whenever Sri Lanka's sovereignty is discussed. They were all tall men, the

product of freedom struggles. As the days go by, their names will shine more resplendently. It is the crop of new leaders which is proving Churchill right. They are either zeroes or neros. With mediocre qualities and unbounded greed, they have made their countries pay for their miss-performance. They have no commitment, no value system, no sensitivity. Indeed, they are men of straw going with

raciness intact but the increasing say of religion and caste in the country's affairs is reducing the system to a farce. The nation has more temples and mosques than schools and hospitals put together. Electoral politics is ousting every bit of decency from public life. Even Parliament has been made a point of ridicule. Pakistan is a convenient whipping boy for all that fails in India. The story of Bangladesh is far more tragic. A child born out of

the Oil-for-food report indicting him and his son. In this category comes LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran. He is more dangerous because he has no scruples.

The reason why such people have come into prominence is the devaluation of norms. Men with values have been pushed into the background or their number has dwindled. Probably, the region is paying the price of tall leaders not allowing the young to come into

continent divided on the basis of religion is once again facing the resurgence of religious identity. Besides these drawbacks, Southeast Asia started its journey with a disadvantage. It was nowhere near industrially advanced countries of the West because the latter had enjoyed a continuous and steady economic development. It had spreadthrough in varying degrees to all classes. Another problem in the region was

because we have gone the wrong way to solve them. We still have not learnt any lesson. On the one hand, we have mixed religion with politics and, on the other, we have not built confidence in one another. Whatever name we give to our disputes, they are essentially the fallout of the age-old suspicion and religious bias which even partition has not resolved.

India was initially a well-knit pluralistic state. But then the RSS was making no headway till it began raising Hinduva slogan. The Pakistani rulers could not rationalise their anti-India stance without raising the cry of jihad. The LTTE had found itself stuck without creating hiatus between the Tamils and the Sinhalese. The region has never been able to overcome its feuds. They have stayed in one form or the other. To think that by sorting out Kashmir the whole region can sit pretty is to delude ourselves. Some other issue would become a Kashmir. The real problem is how to build trust between India and Pakistan.

A wider people-to-people contact may break the crust of misunderstanding. But the hawkish bureaucracy and prejudiced intelligence services have their own agenda. The military junta at Islamabad has yet another consideration: how to heighten the fear of India before the 2007 election so that the Pakistanis see in the military their saviour.

Kuldeep Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES

It is a tragedy that nations in Southeast Asia have not sunk their differences, even superficially. If they want progress, they have to hurry for the time at their disposal is limited. Their pace of development depends on how soon they can become an economic union. People will remain true Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans and Nepalese. But they will also become Southeast Asians and world citizens.

the wind in whichever direction it blows.

It was a Karachi-based bureaucrat-turned-politician, then the Governor General of Pakistan, who handed over power to the army which, like Sindbad the Sailor, is still riding the nation's shoulders. Its 45-year-long governance is there for all to see. Like every military junta, the present one is determined to pull down even the small edifice of normalcy which has been

coming up with India. The mess at the diplomatic level is Islamabad's first onslaught after two years.

No doubt, India has its democ-

liberation struggle is being enslaved by jingo nationalists and religious fundamentalists. Their hobby horse is hatred towards India.

Really speaking, the Southeast Asia is littered with small men whose vision ends where power begins. They are arrogant, having no substance. Look at the Indian scene. The two former Union ministers, Jaswant Singh and Natwar Singh, have most attention on themselves. Self-righteous as they are in their tone and tenor, they are telling lies to cover up the truth coming out against them. One is talking about a non-existent mole in PMO and the other about

their own because of rulers' dynastic consideration. Today in Southeast Asia it is not the survival of the fittest but of the fittestest. No method is considered bad enough to get what one wants. There is no segment of activity which does not reek with corruption, crime or callousness. Where does 'the good of all' figure when practically all eyes are focused on how to grab office or assignment? India, an apostle of democracy, beats other countries when it legislates that MPs and MLAs can also occupy any public office without inviting disqualification. We talk of our spiritual heritage but what we mean is fundamentalism. A sub-

that independence came before the industrialisation, unlike the West where the industrial revolution had taken place long before.

In addition, Southeast Asia suffered from undemocratic traditions and communal divide. The church helped the West unite. But our temples and mosques have built a wall which we find difficult to demolish. This has got extended to nations. Because of religious and ethnic differences, they waste their resources on building war machines. Thus there is very little left for the poor whose number is increasing at an alarming pace. The fact is that we have failed to find solution to our problems

Some suggestions on anti-corruption measures

A R KHANDAKER

MUCH water has flown down the Padma since an Anti-corruption Commission was appointed purported to be free and independent so that no kind of influence or interference could be brought to bear on it to affect the course of its enquiry or investigation of cases. The Commission, however, could not yet fix up the organogram of the body of men to work with and their method of recruitment. In the mean time between the scraping of Anti-corruption Bureau and the taking up of the job by the Commission, corruption could go unhindered; a tax holiday, as it were, for those who want to flourish in the trade.

Be that as it may, corruption being endemic, it will be too heavy a task for even all too powerful an Anti-corruption Commission to cope with. As we had, not too far bygone days, two public service commissions functioning, one for central superior services and the

other for the provincial services. Likewise, we may have two separate organisations like the Anti-corruption Commission and the Bureau of Anti-corruption, to grapple with the problem. As though an Anti-corruption Council does not exist in our neighbouring countries like India and Pakistan there the CBI and the FBI both working under the central government are carrying out their jobs quite satisfactorily.

Anti-corruption Commission may be entrusted to deal with the corruption of public servants of higher echelon -- from the cabinet ministers down to secretaries and joint secretaries -- and complaints against national and multinational companies for big commercial frauds. The Bureau of Anti-corruption may, as usual, remain engaged with all other types of corruption cases against other persons in government and other public services. It appears reasonable and practical that the problem can be taken up by two-

way approach so that the main brunt of the criticisms against the government making banner headlines in newspapers and attracting attention of World Bank, ADB, and other donor agencies can be taken up by the Commission which is expected to be fair and above any kind of influence. The locus standi of the TIB, joining the chorus, is not understandable. The collation of data mainly collected from newspapers and their analysis and interpretation perhaps leaves much to be desired. Nevertheless an independent Commission should be able to put a stop to all these. The advocacy of the ADB pleading repeatedly for foreign investment of a particular company that it would be beneficial for Bangladesh is perhaps beyond diplomatic norm or protocol. Why one should feel discreet to render uncalled for advice?

The constitution of the Commission is very important. Its job is basically investigative. Therefore the Commission mem-

bers should be very carefully selected. A mere honest person may not be able to deliver the goods. So those from among the senior officers who are both honest and efficient, having investigative ability and reputation of withstanding pressure and influence, should be selected. The appointment will be made by the President of the Republic and to whom alone the Commission will be responsible. Corruptions of the kind that affect the day to day life of the common man are various. It would be very difficult if not impossible on the part of the Commission alone to deal with all those cases. Corruption in many forms has now spread to village level. Many of these do not require to be investigated by the Commission nor should they be burdened with that. The Bureau officers can enquire and investigate such cases.

One may recall the works programme started during the Basic Democracy period. Rural

development expenditure although made out of public fund was kept out of statutory auditing and innumerable complaints of embezzlement and bribery started pouring in which were beyond the capacity of the Anti-corruption Department to handle. Therefore there was a general order that cases involving less than one lac rupees (one lac taka) need not be investigated, in other words, those cases were decriminalised. Such a situation is not at all desirable.

Corruption at all levels of the government servants and various other attached offices, corporations, banks and other financial institutions dealing with public finance should be left to the Bureau of Anti-corruption.

After every thing said and done, corruption as a phenomenon cannot be controlled not to speak of eradication by only taking punitive action. A good governance demands that public officers do not barter justice for

any kind of illegal gratification. Justice does not only mean fair judgment in a court of law, it encompasses fair decisions in all matters, upholding private or public rights. In all cases when a complaint is made, there must be fair enquiry with a view to providing remedy. The point which needs to be emphasised is that it is the sacred duty of the hierarchy of the supervising officers of all ministries and their attached departments to exercise proper supervision and control including keeping watchful eyes on elements of corruption or foul play. In addition to maintaining a proper vigilance, all complaints must be promptly enquired departmentally and if substantiated, appropriate action should be taken. If this is done in the right earnest the burden on the Commission or the Bureau will be much less leaving enough time for them to deal with other cases.

Corruption, being a moral and ethical vice, has now become a

socio-economic problem. During earlier days the phenomenon of corruption could be found among the lower income groups only when they were forced by circumstances. They used to maintain a strict confidentiality about it even from their kith and kin. The matter was not socially acceptable. Thus far the matter was only depending on economic reason, nay the pecuniary circumstance of the individual.

Corruption, however, has assumed an universal character to become socio-economic problem to some sections of the society and for some others a welcome twist in the new economic order. The life style lure, end justifying the means, trampled over the old values. Now there is nothing wrong with an ostentatious way of living. For doing that when one cannot meet the expenses from his known sources of income, hence he has to take recourse to corrupt practices. Thus corruption got a

sort of social permissiveness. So if the problem is to be controlled to a tolerable limit, there is a dire need primarily for a change of the political will. A beginning has to be made from the top. Corrupt politicians and Administrators must be removed from public affairs by imposing legal provisions sanctioning conditions of disqualification. Life style has to change. A living wage has to be given to the fixed income earner with annual increase proportionate to the inflationary rate affecting the purchasing power. There may be requirement of legislation to control certain superfluous acts or habits. All non-productive expenditure in the name of development has to be cut down. Dependence of our economy on foreign loans and grants must be slashed down eventually to nil. The suggestions may sound regressive to many but is there any alternative?

ARKhandaker is a retired I.C of Police.