

'Alarm bells are ringing'

Mike Moore, former prime minister of New Zealand and ex-head of the WTO, was in Dhaka from September 8-11, as one of the multi-national delegation organized by the NDI to assess the state of Bangladesh's electoral preparations. The delegation issued its report on its findings on September 11. Moore met with The Daily Star's Zafar Sobhan later in the day to make clear the delegation's thinking.

Zafar Sobhan: What further role does NDI contemplate playing in the electoral process here?
 Mike Moore: NDI has been on the ground with staff and research in Bangladesh for many years now and intends to be for many years to come, and there is likely to be a major delegation with international credibility at the time of the election. Having said that, there are also going to be other international delegations coming. The Commonwealth and the EU will do their own pre-election assessments, and they will be speaking to us about our report.
 We wanted to express that the alarm bells are ringing here of the possibility of things going wrong. I suspect another delegation, if they find the same problems we have identified, and these have not been corrected in the next few weeks, the criticism will be quite intense.
 We are saying that there are serious problems which need to be addressed and can be addressed -- but next month is too late. This has

to start immediately. So there is nothing wrong that cannot be fixed?
 That's right. There have been problems before. But that doesn't make this right. This is a new game. It has got to be better. We think, for instance, that the electoral list can be substantially improved.
 We are a bit confused as to the Election Commission. The Election Commission does not recognize the problem. If they think they haven't got a problem, how can they fix it? And if they think they don't have a problem, they are the only people we have met who think so.
 Now, if you have a problem, how do you fix it? You take corrective action. Part of the action is building confidence. How? You meet with the opposition. The ones represented in parliament. Meeting 110 parties is no good. Civil society and the media want to help. And we want to encourage civil society and the media to help,

to publicize what needs to be done. We found a lot of people who want to help and who can help.
 And the chief election commissioner needs a lot of help. But if he won't take action, if he thinks everything is OK, and he is not listening, something bad is going to happen.
 It will never be perfect. But the cleaner you can get the list, the easier it will be to monitor on election day. Building confidence. Taking corrective action. That's what needs to be done right now. Is there time to fix the voter list? Only just. Only just. We're talking weeks.
 If there is no corrective action by the end of the month would it be too late?
 I would have thought that it would have to start as soon as you can. Obviously, you can't have a change in everything, but steps can be taken. We would expect to see a change in attitude, in behaviour.

There will be terrible costs to Bangladesh if this is not done with dignity and coherence. And it can be.
 The world is watching. If things go badly, there are all these people out there in other parliaments who will want to take what they think is appropriate action. Sanctions. Tariffs. Garment exports. It's a political world.
 The report says NDI will not certify the election process as fair or unfair. But will NDI be proffering an opinion? A report?
 Make no mistake, this is a wonderfully open world. People are interested. The world watches these things.
 So what happens if things are not fixed?
 I can't predict at this point. But let me say that it would be enormously harmful and potentially dangerous to the stability and progress of the country if any major party decided to boycott the election.
 Therefore confidence has to be built so that there is no reason for a boycott. Look, it has happened before. There are still two months. No reason it can't happen again. But if the same things are being said in two months' time, I would be very worried.
 Page five of the report states: "In the absence of a strong, corrective, and urgent response, confidence in the chief election com-

missioner will continue to deteriorate to the point that he should not continue his duties."
 You can argue whether it should be "should" or "could" -- but it is hard to see how he could walk down the street -- he is a man of dignity -- with his head held high, if he didn't. But bluntly, he didn't recognize the problem. He didn't seem to welcome engaging with other political parties or civil society. He was dismissive in the media of there being a problem. It is hard to fix something if you don't think you have a problem.
 This still can be improved. There is time for things to be corrected, to bring in the opposition and civil society and build confidence in the process. I am sure the chief election commissioner, who is a dignified man and a justice, would not want his name to be in a dark corner of Bangladesh's history.
 Is it not possible to hold a credible election with the present voter list? You're a good journalist and that's a hard question. I'll say this. Unless the list is improved, it will make it difficult for people to perceive a fair result.
 What one would do if one were the election commissioner or the government is to have a time-line. By this time, we need this done. The caretaker is coming. We need consultation and consensus.
 It is not just the law and the constitution -- if how you deal



with it. It is good faith.
 Same for the opposition. It is not good enough for them to say they weren't consulted. There are always reasons you can choose not to go to a meeting. Notice wasn't given in time. But there has to be good faith.
 The caretaker government doesn't have a mandate for whole-

sale changes. There is a time line. It must be respected.
 The Commonwealth and EU are sending serious delegations. EU delegation is here now the other one will be here in three weeks. We should know something by then.
 We will see whether the chief election commissioner has got the message. We have been very polite

and diplomatic. But if nothing has happened, then others will respond to that.
 A good journalist would go down to the Election Commission and see what he says this week and what he says next week, to see if the chief election commissioner has got the message.

Food crisis in the offing?



M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

THE northern districts of the country suffered from prolonged drought during the rainy season of the current year. According to reports, Rajshahi division, comprising of 16 northern districts, recorded markedly low rainfall in the rainy season. Whereas the rainfall recorded there last year was 862 mm in June and July, it was a meagre 314 mm during the same period this year. Reports further reveal that Rajshahi division did not experience such a prolonged drought during the rainy season in the last twenty-five years. This drought will seriously affect the aman production in Rajshahi division. It may be mentioned that the northern region of Bangladesh, Rajshahi division to be particular, is the largest contributor in overall agriculture production.
 Rice is the staple food of Bangladesh, providing about 93 percent of the country's total cereal intake and about 75 percent of the calories in our diet.
 The production of food grains (rice and wheat) stood at 100.46 lakh metric tons in 1971-72. The sustained efforts by the successive governments had a salutary effect on the production of food grains that reached 267.58 lakh tons in 2000-2001, which was till then the highest production of food grains in the country.
 Based on the Household Income & Expenditure Survey (HIES) calculation of 476 grams per capita per day intake of food grains, domestic production of food grains for the first time could marginally meet the requirement for food grains for a population of 129 million.
 But the increase in the production of food grains could not be sustained. The following table, based on food ministry sources

BARE FACTS

A larger area has to be brought under boro cultivation to offset the loss in aman production. Since boro is primarily an irrigation-based crop, measures have to be taken in advance to ensure timely and regular supply of diesel, electricity, and fertilizer. Although the CTG's main responsibility is to render all possible aid and assistance to the Election Commission for holding general elections, it may have to undertake a crash program to increase the generation and distribution capacity of electricity and make it available to the farmers for significantly increasing boro yield in the interest of the nation's food security.

highest production of 2003-04 by 1.48 lakh tons only, while the net population during the period increased by at least 6 million. The net production available for human consumption stood at 24,831 lakh tons. This could marginally meet the requirement of 139 million people at 476 grams per capita per day.
 Among the three major rice crops (aus, aman, and boro), aman continued to top the list until 1997-98. Available statistics show that in 1998-99, aman was replaced by boro as the highest producing rice. Since then boro has continued to top the list. The most important advantage is that the aman variety requires little irrigation since it is typically sown when the monsoon is in full swing. There is thus little requirement for supplementary irrigation. But the drought in the rainy season in the northern districts has come as a serious threat to aman production this year.
 Information available from the field-level officials of the department of agriculture extension (DAE), farmers and the media suggest that aman production in the northern districts will be seriously hampered this year. Quoting the DAE sources, the Daily Star on August 28 carried a report which said that over 124,000 hectares of land in 16 northern districts of the country could not be utilised for aman cultivation due to lack of rainfall this year. According to a report, published recently in another Dhaka daily, the aman crops would be 40 per cent less this year.
 A food ministry source reveals

of 30 lakh tons, or so, compared to the production last year. The production figures of aman in the past six years show that the highest production of aman stood at 112.49 lakh tons in 2000-2001.
 The low production at the national level is of grave significance to Bangladesh, and especially to the northern districts that are prone to seasonal famine known as monga. It is aptly said that the aman crops are the only cushion for a large section of agrarian households in the northern region and they suffer from a severe food crisis due to lack of employment. A bad aman harvest would mean low employment in the north. It will only aggravate and hasten monga this year.
 Now, the question that arises is: what are the measures that the government should take to avert the drought-driven aman production loss?
 First, the government should immediately finalize a crash program that will provide necessary support and incentives to the farmers to produce non-cereal products in the lands that could not be utilised for aman production due to lack of rainfall. The problem here is that the government has got one and a half months to hand over power to the caretaker government (CTG). The government is fully involved in activities pertaining to the forthcoming election and has little or no time to look into the vital problem of food shortage.
 Second, a larger area has to be brought under boro cultivation to offset the loss in aman production. Since boro is primarily an irrigation-based crop, measures have to be taken in advance to ensure timely and regular supply of diesel, electricity, and fertilizer. Although the CTG's main responsibility is to render all possible aid and assistance to the Election Commission for holding general elections, it may have to undertake a crash program to increase the generation and distribution capacity of electricity and make it available to the farmers for significantly increasing boro yield in the interest of the nation's food security.
 It may be mentioned that 100 MW or so of electricity were added to the generation capacity in the 4 years 10 months of alliance rule against growing demand for electricity at above 10 percent annually. Consequently, the last boro season saw the killing of farmers when they demanded electricity to help

irrigate their boro crops.
 Third, the main source of import of rice is India. Other important sources are Thailand and Vietnam. The price of coarse rice in the international market has been on the increase since the start of 2005-06. In an attempt to increase domestic supply, and to bring down prices, the government may allow duty free rice import by private traders till the start of the next boro harvest.
 Fourth, wheat is the second most important cereal in the country. The demand for wheat is growing day by day, particularly in the urban areas. Our annual requirement of wheat is more than 30 lakh tons. In 1999-2000, wheat production stood at 1,840,000 tons. The production of wheat has declined to only 730,000 tons in 2005-06. The price of wheat in the international markets has been on the increase from the middle of 2005. The price reached \$203 per ton by the end of June, 2006. The entry of India, so long an exporter of wheat, into the import market has further pushed the wheat price up. The government should, therefore, allow duty free wheat import by private traders for a certain period to increase domestic supply and bring down prices.
 Last, but not the least, the government must maintain satisfactory food security stocks through internal procurement, and, if necessary, through imports in public sector. In the late nineties, the then AL government decided to maintain security stocks of food grains at a minimum of 10 lakh tons at all times, and though this decision still remains in force the stocks often go below that level. The government must maintain satisfactory security stocks for distribution of food grains under PFDS, as well as for selling food grains at fair price through OMS to help stabilise the price of food grains in the market.
 To conclude, a concerted effort is needed to offset the estimated loss of aman production this year due to prolonged drought during the rainy season in the northern region. The main thrust should be on the next boro crop. All possible facilities and assistance must be rendered to farmers to attain a production target that will surpass all previous records of boro production in the country.

shows the domestic production of food grains between 2000-2001 and 2005-2006, as well growth in population during the same period.
 It would appear from the above table that total gross production of domestic foodgrains in 2005-06 has exceeded the

that its preliminary field-level survey shows that aman production this year (2006-2007) would be 20 percent less in comparison with last year's (2005-06) production of 110 lakh tons. This means that the next aman production would be around 80 lakh tons, and that means a shortfall

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The damage done

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BARELY a few days after ruling party secretary general Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan's accusation that the opposition parties were making the country's constitutional bodies controversial, a judge was appointed to the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court on August 24, superseding his seniors. Earlier, 17 High Court judges were given permanent appointment on August 23.
 The chief justice did not make any recommendation about two of the judges. Moreover, there were serious controversies about some of the judges from the very beginning of their ad hoc appointment. Although the government claimed that everything had been done according to the constitution, long-fought convention and the inherent message of the constitution were definitely ignored while making these appointments. All these acts were seen as blows to the supreme judiciary of the country.
 I don't think that anyone will disagree that there is a qualitative difference between the current coalition government and the BNP government of 1991-1995. The previous BNP government was a hundred times more rational, judicious, better performing, pro-people, and democratic than the present one. This time the BNP-led 4-party government not only failed

to render better service to the people, but has also destroyed some of the vital institutions of the country which, in the long run, might cause irreparable damage to the country and its people.
 Perhaps the severest damage wrought to the republic is the institutionalization and politicization of every organ of the state. From the judiciary to the administration, from markets to river ghats and tenders, everything has been politicized nakedly and shamelessly during the last five years. Nepotism, favouritism, and corruption are nothing new in our society, but their pervasive use during the last five years has crossed all palatable limits.
 To safeguard people's interest, our constitution has made several bodies of the republic constitutional ones. The Supreme Court, Election Commission, Public Service Commission, and Comptroller and Auditor General's Office are such organs of the state.
 While framing the constitution, its authors entrusted the responsibility of constituting those bodies with the president. They never thought that the president would degenerate the bodies by appointing partisan and morally degraded persons.
 In fact, even the military rulers in the late 70s and 80s did not dare to interfere with these constitutional bodies. With some exceptions, the common people used to get justice

from these institutions. But their hopes and expectations were shattered by the democratic governments who, time and again, tried to take control of the institutions by placing their own men in the constitutional posts.
 If we consider the PSC as an example, we will find that, before the 90s, this constitutional body was a perfectly decent institution which used to work without any fear or favour. As a result, many meritorious, but non-political students, got recruited into government jobs.
 But the scenario was dramatically changed after 1990 when the PSC turned into a rubber stamp institution, carrying out the orders of the student wings of the political party in power. During the present government, the PSC has lost its remaining credibility and acceptance of the general public. Many may differ with my views, but I just want to cite one example of the appointment of 320 upazila election officers in 2005, of whom 290 were from two student organizations of the ruling coalition. It seems that all the meritorious students assemble under the umbrellas of these two student organizations.
 The Supreme Court is the last resort of the public for getting justice when governments let loose a reign of terror on opponent groups. But widespread appointment of partisan people in the higher judiciary will not only destroy its spirit but also snatch the

rights of the common people. A partisan person will never be able to be neutral while delivering judgement, which is based on explanations of laws and evidence, and application of rationality. That a person, who once practiced partisan politics and irrational behaviour, can turn into a rational being after becoming a judge is totally absurd.
 Another vital constitutional body -- Election Commission -- was always at the centre of controversies since the military rules. The EC could never come out of the controversy because of exaggerated accusations by the defeated parties of an election, and also due to some genuine lapses and inherent weaknesses. The EC is a toothless organization which has to depend on government kindness for its budget and manpower for its secretariat and field offices.
 Moreover, with few exceptions, the chief election commissioner and other commissioners were always appointed on the basis of political colour. They always serve the purpose of the ruling parties. The present EC is an ideal example of our polluted politics, whose main goal is to gain state power by any means -- fair or foul. Politicians do not consider anything which can help them enter the corridors of power as wrong.

Teaching them a lesson

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AS long as the accumulated mint is there, monopoly in politics will be there. Being driven by this motto, politicians in the country erred, are immersed in blunders. Everyone in the country has learned and tends to learn something. It is only one species, the politicians, which have been deprived so far. Leaders of ruling parties almost always criticize the opposition to the point of terming them as anti-state forces. In recent times, however, the over-smart politicians have chosen to castigate the civil society as well.
 There is, however, a background to this. After restoration of democracy in 1991, our democratic politics got increasingly criminalized. Like the military dictators, the democratic rulers, too, started behaving like feudal kings. In the process, they lost moral strength. In a desperate bid to cling to power, they resorted to all types of machinations. Arguably, by-election riggings in Magura during the first BNP government opened the Pandora's box.
 The farcical February 1996 election was the culmination of foolhardy politics of that government, outcome of which is still vibrant in everybody's memory. During the next AL government, there was phenomenal rise of

terrorist activities, especially by the godfathers. Though that AL government counted success on some counts, fear of terrorism was so great that people were praying for sort of salvation. However, the role of the then opposition party was meagre.
 There was thus an urgent need for articulating public grievances. And it was then, I do believe, that the civil society people, spearheaded by a group of media activists, rose to the occasion. Tales of tyranny of local godfathers were brought to the eyes of the public so vividly that the AL had to pay through the nose in the 2001 general elections. During the current regime, too, politicians, especially ruling party stalwarts, have committed many mistakes.
 This government has a tendency to claim success in checking terrorism through deployment of Rab. But, does the Rab concept go well with the very objectives of democracy and justice or does it just stifle them? Whatever might have been the consequences of formation of Rab, with no stretch of the imagination can its justification be established in a civilized society. However, Rab was used sparingly in reining in militancy before it exploded.
 The ruling party supremo Khaleda Zia and her son Tarique Rahman are now busy campaigning for the next general elections

with the promise of uprooting corruption. This promise, to my mind, significant in either of two ways: it either betrays their subconscious guilt -- although it is quite unnecessary as the mint piled up through insatiable corruption is supposed to win them the next general elections come what may (!) -- or the hunger for money has just subsided.
 Will it, however, be an exaggeration if it is said that the current government has very successfully championed the cause of corruption in the last five years? Admittedly, the stories of graft by the operational head of BNP surrounded by Young Turks have become notoriously popular among cross-sections of people ranging from well-educated urban people to illiterate yet spirited farmers in remote villages.
 Interestingly enough, the gang leader of the misdirected young bloc has now decided to teach the civil society a lesson very much in line with Mahmudur Rahman. Mind you, Mahmudur filed a defamation case which was premised on a non-specific allegation. However, he did not respond to ridiculous cartoons which really defamed him.
 More interestingly, corruption has shown its charisma during the current regime epitomised by criminal syndicates, which, like the militancy, were just a "media creation" previously. Now, how-

ever, the powerful ministers are more than happy to admit their prevalence. It's indeed a nice ploy to gather sort of cheap popularity at the end of the tenure. Yes, syndicates are out to throttle the nation. But none is there to cheek it as the country has to go by the rules of free market economy.
 However, the commoners, that too ranging from urban to rural, will tell you a totally different story behind the indomitable and uncontrollable syndicates. Yes, it reflects -- in a hush-hush manner, though -- to the very visibly invisible hand of Hawa Bhavan and its landlord in this ruthless business of countrywide syndication. Some tend to add the age-old epithet -- (Sowdagor or Businessman) to the landlord's name as well.
 Yes, he has now decided to make the civil society people pay for their endeavour to create consciousness among the people for pressing home the demand for electing honest candidates and rejecting crooked politicians in the next general elections. Here, again, it betrays a sort of tentativeness. Why should the civil society move be disconcerting to him if he is honest? It's indeed an irony that our myopic politicians get trapped in their own words while trying to make mincemeat of others.

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