

Sorry tale of DMCH

Patients hostage to corrupt employees

DHAKA Medical College Hospital (DMCH) has become a gold mine for the hordes of bribe-seekers. Though this is not a new story yet we must thank the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) for bringing forth a recent report that tells us that people collectively pay Tk. 48 lakh in bribes at various stages in a year to get seats for their patients who go there for treatment. The bribe per seat may go as high as Tk. 188 on an average and that food worth Tk. 1.15 crore go in waste every year. That is not the end of the sordid tale. The report further says that even job-seekers have to pay huge sums of money to the employers in DMCH for getting third grade jobs. This dismal picture about the largest hospital run by the government in the country was presented in a round table in the city by TIB.

Veritably, a kind of free-for-all is going on at DMCH where the top authorities have little control over a section of employees, particularly over the zealously guarded network of a vicious gang of third grade staff, who control all the important sections at the institution. A patient would get no help, not even entry in case of an emergency, until the palms of these felons are greased sufficiently. Only on payment of bribe that a patient in deathbed would get a cylinder of oxygen, which the hospital is supposed to make available immediately. The scenario at the outdoors is as depressing as anywhere at DMCH. Though outdoor patients are supposed to pay Tk.5 as ticket fee, the gang extracts as much as Tk.21 on an average per person. Even that does not end the harassment and negligence once they get entry to doctors' chambers. Stories regarding pilferage of medicines and medical equipment from the stores and keeping honest doctors and nurses hostage to their whims by the third grade employees abound in the media and yet we have not seen any drastic action taken against the corrupt elements.

There is acute shortage of hospital beds for patients in the city and the number of hospitals needs to be increased but that will not solve the problem of corruption and under-service unless a cleansing drive is launched in all the existing facilities. We feel the TIB recommendation for appointment of a health ombudsman and suggestions for making the hospital autonomous are points worth pondering. We also feel that involvement of qualified civil society members in the running of the affairs of the hospital would work as a deterring factor for the corrupt elements.

Loan default issue

A new policy needed

A recent report of the Bangladesh Bank has revealed that of the 20 top bank loan defaulters, 85 percent were different government entities, the rest being in the private sector. Although some of the private loan defaulters of late are trying to reschedule payments of their loans, there is no such move on the part of the government agencies despite repeated reminders from the Bangladesh Bank to the banks concerned asking them to "arrange rescheduling of the loan payment" with their defaulting clients.

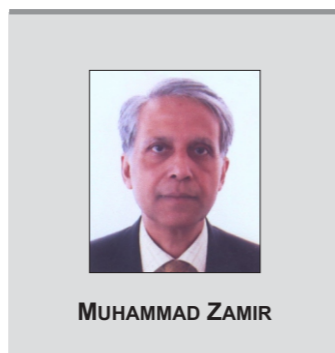
It is, however, observed that the private defaulters are currently showing some interest in loan repayment rescheduling considering their possible candidacy in the forthcoming election. We suggested in an earlier comment that their first installment of repayment should be kept high so that they do not get away by paying a nominal amount to start with.

The Bangladesh Bank governor in a get-tough signal to the bank managements exhorted upon them to take action against one top loan defaulter in their banks so that the message can get through to the others to repay or face punitive action. The question is there is a dichotomy between the government asking the private sector to repay loans while the state sector itself is the biggest borrower of bank money and it is also defaulting badly. It's therefore imperative that the public sector corporations become managerially so efficient that they don't have to borrow money from the banks.

But what are we going to do with the classified loans of the public sector entities in the first place? Getting the government sector defaulters to repay their loans is becoming increasingly problematic as the following two instances illustrate. Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation's total defaulted loan stands at Tk 75crore. While a court has asked the bank concerned to realise the money through auction against BADC, practically, it remains a difficult proposition, because the BADC is a government entity. Another example is afforded by Bangladesh Autorickshaw Chalak Samity, a top defaulter with government guarantee for its loan worth Tk 77crore. The committee that took the loan from three banks on behalf of the samity no longer exists. The new committee that has been formed has asked for a fresh loan!

Given the sordid experience with bank loan default problems, it is imperative that there is a rethink on the whole gamut of lending policies so that these are reformed and recast with the best interest of the national economy in mind.

North Korea: Seeking symbolical security



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

ONE feature about North Korea is absolute. Nothing is certain about that country -- the last frontier of the Cold War. Today, we have a situation where DPRK appears to be the latest, the ninth member of an exclusive club, where each country can claim having nuclear weapons. The DPRK Government has declared that it has detonated a nuclear bomb of around 15 kiloton capacity. Yet, there are many countries, including the USA, not totally sure, if such an assertion is real.

Such uncertainty has made the situation that much more surreal. The White House, having recently failed to prove their claims in Iraq, appear to have grown that much more cautious about announcing the presence of weapons of mass destruction in the DPRK. In fact, it was most interesting to read Agence France-Presse's report from Washington headlined 'US may never know whether North Korea tested N-bomb'. In most matters pertaining to North Korea, analysts in USA are usually forthcoming. Consequently, the comment from White House spokesman Tony Snow was refreshingly different. It was indicated that it 'may take some time' before the US could conclude whether DPRK had gone nuclear. It was also stated that this process would be 'a complex undertaking'. Given the availability of hi-tech, this

was indeed surprising. Japan, a neighbour of North Korea, talked tough in the United Nations Security Council, but its Prime Minister Shinzo Abe cautiously informed his Parliament that 'it is hard to say' if there has been a successful nuclear test. In fact, it has since been revealed by this country that its monitoring aircraft had detected no unusual radiation levels in dust samples collected over the major Japanese islands of Kyushu, Honshu and Hokkaido. Apparently, such signs would have been evident had there been any strong nuclear explosion.

This controversy was taken one step further by the French Defence Minister Michele Alliot-Marie with the comment that France 'was not certain that North Korea's test explosion was nuclear, and that, if it was, then it was a failure'. It was also suggested that instead of being a nuclear explosion, it might have been just a huge conventional explosion. French analysts also added another twist to the scenario. They pointed out that 'if it was a failed nuclear test, it would not change the serious nature of the affair' as DPRK might seek to show to the world through a second attempt that it was capable of detonating nuclear weapons.

I wish I could have said that France, Japan and the USA, not being sure, means that there is a credibility gap in DPRK's claims. Unfortunately, such an assertion does not seem possible. Russia's Defence Ministry is not only sure that a nuclear test has been undertaken by DPRK, but they are interpreting differences of opinion as being based more on 'politics' rather than correct scientific analysis. In any case, the intensity of the nuclear device supposed to have been exploded varies widely from about 0.5 kilotons (France) to 5 kilotons (Russia). South Korea, next door neighbour of DPRK has estimated the kiloton fallout to be about 0.8 and the USA slightly less than one kiloton. For better comparative understanding, readers may note that the Hiroshima World War II bomb had an intensity of 12.5 kilotons. Such comparison and uncertainty about the nature of the test also reveals the reason why the response and reaction till now have been on a relatively lower scale.

Confronted with a dilemma, President Bush, known for unilateralist efforts, displayed maturity for a change. He termed the North Korean action as constituting 'a threat to international peace and security' and urged that it required 'an immediate response'. He also reiterated that the US remained committed to diplomacy. Other reactions have also been interesting. India, keen to show itself

as a responsible nuclear power, went on record by stating that 'erosion of the non-proliferation regime was not in our interests'. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, speaking from London also observed that India does not support another nuclear weapons state. One would be tempted to observe that India's reaction to a great extent has been out of her concern that her nuclear cooperation deal with the United States could be undermined if it did not react sharply.

South Korea, quite understandably, went on high alert and declared that it would review thawing of relations with its northern neighbour. Basking in the glory of the appointment of their Foreign Minister as the next UN Secretary General, South Korea now finds itself in the difficult position of being under pressure to suspend or scale down its 'sunshine' policy of economic engagement with its northern neighbour.

China, the host of 'Six-Party Talks' (to persuade North Korea not to go nuclear) for the past two years, has clearly been embarrassed. It had been apparent for quite some time that USA was averse to using military force in the DPRK and had left it to China to restrain its southern neighbour. I remember writing on this issue last year and noting that USA and her partners had few obvious options other than to keep

North Korea hemmed in. I had observed that they would have to rely on patient negotiations and on China for such influence that China possesses on the DPRK regime. It does appear now that any hope on China being able to control DPRK was greatly exaggerated.

However, no consideration of the DPRK nuclear test would be complete without a brief discussion of Iran's interpretation of why DPRK undertook the nuclear test. Iran has blamed the other major nuclear powers for this situation. Iranian government spokesman Gholam Hossein Elham has noted that 'the major powers feel that they are entitled to use and produce nuclear weapons'. Iran has described such a situation as unjust, unequal and discriminatory according to the precepts of international law. They feel that such a practice has resulted in threats to world peace. Iran appears to have a point here.

Recent events have proven one thing. The non-proliferation regime has really not worked. It has not discouraged nations to go forward on the path of nuclear nationalism. We have seen examples of that in India and Pakistan. We have also seen quest for security, inducing Israel, to achieve covert nuclear capability. There are many others waiting in the wings.

It would be pertinent at this point to also refer here to some recent comments made by Dr Hans Blix, former United Nations weapons inspector and Chairman of the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission. He has remarked that while the current international debate focuses on limiting the spread of nuclear weapons, it tends to overlook the fact that they are dangerous wherever they might presently be. In this context, he has suggested that, as well as working to prevent their proliferation, the international community should urge the states that cur-

rently possess nuclear weapons to revive their disarmament efforts. Dr. Blix believes that this would not only reduce the nuclear threat, but would also prevent proliferation. I totally agree with this proposition. This would also be more logical than 'nuclear states' rearming and relying on their nuclear weapons, and preaching arms control and restraint to others. The real need is to get agreement for all nuclear states to disarm and reduce their stocks of nuclear weapons.

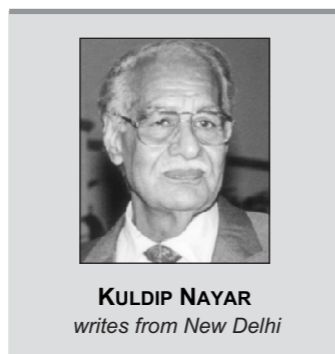
DPRK has crossed a threshold that they need not have. It is a small country with a lot of problems. Millions of its citizens are denied basic health care rights and are perennially suffering from malnutrition. I remember the agony that I went through as Permanent Representative of Bangladesh to the World Food Programme and the International Fund for Agricultural Development. Bangladesh held important portfolios in both multilateral Organizations and had to work very hard to steer through agreed packages of food aid for DPRK. I understand that food security is still very bleak in DPRK. Wasting money on nuclear weapons is hardly a suitable alternative.

North Korean leaders are probably trying to flag their symbolical quest for security through such provocative action. However, this is not the best way of doing it.

Nevertheless, one feels, that DPRK needs to be re-assured that they are not going to be invaded and that there is no plan for regime change. It is also important that the Six-Party talks are re-convened as soon as possible. Let there also be strict sanctions at the same time to ensure that the carrot and stick formula works.

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Bangla example, South Asian response



KULDIP NAYYAR

writes from New Delhi

Ido not know if the meek will inherit the earth, as the biblical saying goes. But whenever anyone among them gets the recognition, I feel inspired, more so when the person happens to be from the region. Muhammad Yunus who has won the Nobel Peace Prize is a simple, unassuming Bangladeshi who has done the entire South Asia proud. That the honour has come to him for helping the poor for reconstructing their lives is all the more commendable. South Asia is the most exploited area where more than 50 per cent people live on the periphery.

What the Yunus experiment tells is that even an individual, if determined, can make a dent in closed doors behind which the poor have been generally stacked. Thirty-two years ago he loaned from his own pocket some Rs 250 to a group of famine-stricken farmers to save them from the clutches of money-lenders. Two years later, he opened his Grameen Bank for the same purpose. Today, he has 65 million borrowers, mostly women, who have transformed their living conditions through self-employment.

I had the privilege of meeting Yunus early this year when he was the main speaker at the 15th anniversary of The Daily Star at Dhaka. Standing at the rostrum in his kurta and pajama, he reflected honesty and integrity which is so limited in the region. In his speech, he said that a poverty-free world was a reachable dream provided the

better off in the society were willing to share their riches. Bangladesh is rowdy, boisterous and drenched in fundamentalism. But it is a democracy all right. Liberals are divided but they speak out against fanaticism in one voice. The press is free if a newspaper is willing to stand up to the government's blandishments. In any case, Bangladesh is far better than those countries in the region where political parties compromise with the right to rule themselves and "adjust" with autocracy or dictatorship.

An admirable practice in Bangladesh is that a caretaker government is in power three months before the general elections are held. The purpose is to ensure that the official machinery does not take sides. (October 28 is the date for the changeover). The last retired chief justice is appointed as the chief adviser of the next caretaker government. So far the experiment has worked reasonably well. But the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has allegedly changed the rules of the game. This has forced the other main political party, Awami League, to threaten the boycott of the polls. The Election Commission too does not look or behave like an objective body. The Awami League has demanded for its reconstitution before the party decides to participate in elections.

What sustains hope in the democratic setup of Bangladesh is that even the biggest political crisis is sorted out through a dialogue. The BNP and the Awami League are talking to each other, although haltingly, to find a solution to the appointment of a caretaker adviser to the caretaker government and the Election Commission. Despite all this, Bangladesh is teetering at the edge of violence. Religious extremism looks like having an upper hand. Bangladesh has come a long way, from domination to liberation, to understand that the society it aims at cannot be brought about through violence.

In fact, all South Asian countries face a challenge from the forces of terror which parade themselves as the protector of their identity and culture. I feel that any appeal to violence is particularly dangerous in the region because of its inherent disruptive character. We have too many fissiparous tendencies for us to take risk. They are tearing our societies apart. The basic thing, I believe, is that wrong means will not lead to right results and that this is no longer merely an ethical doctrine but a practical proposition.

True, there is a sense of frustration and depression. The old buoyancy of spirit is not to be found at a time when enthusiasm and hard work are most needed. In our efforts to insure material prosperity, I feel, we have not paid any attention to the spiritual element of human nature.

I have seen over the years that in industrially-advanced coun-

tries, there has been a continuous trend of economic development. Further, this economic development has spread, though in varying degrees, to all classes. This does not apply to our countries which are not industrially developed. Indeed, the struggle for development in our part of the world is very difficult and sometimes, in spite of the efforts made, economic inequalities not only remain but tend to become worse. Normally speaking, it may be said that the forces of such a society, if left unchecked, tend to make rich richer and the poor poorer and thus increase the gap between them. This holds good for countries as well as to groups or regions or classes within countries.

Soft as India is, it believes that the affluent nations of the world can build the country. Practically every field has been opened to foreign investors. Of course, they have the money and the technology. But what will happen to the sovereignty of India or, for that matter, other countries in South Asia? Strange, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh should tell the European Union at Helsinki to take advantage of special tax-free enclaves, Special Economic Zones. (Finance Minister P Chidambaram reportedly cautioned the government against the loss of revenue running into crores

of rupees at a cabinet meeting but was silenced).

I was at Bhubaneswar last week and found how practically every district of Orissa -- there are 30 of them -- is being handed over to multinational companies. The two natural resources -- the bauxite and iron ore -- are being leased to them with thousands of acres of agricultural land for the infrastructure. There is neither consideration for rehabilitation of the uprooted people nor for the depletion of natural resources. The Nobel Prize committee has rightly said that lasting peace cannot be achieved unless large population groups find ways in which to break out of poverty. But how can this be

possible when the working of globalisation is loaded in favour of developed countries?

Is there no way to develop without turning our back on what we can do on our own? Every field does not have to be opened to foreign investment. We can choose as China does. The message by Yunus from Bangladesh is that the poor can work their way through if they build the nation into a cooperative endeavour. The nation can be stretched to become a region. The South Asia Economic Union is the answer to the problems of backwardness and poverty.

Kuldip Nayyar is an eminent Indian columnist.



OPINION

Reversal of fortune

ABMS ZAHUR

For the first time an alliance government in Bangladesh has completed five years of its tenure. During its entire existence of 35 years, Bangladesh could enjoy the dignity of democratic rule for about 19 years. Strange things happened during the period 1982-90, the loss of democratic rule, and re-establishment of democracy through the joint effort of the major parties, BNP and AL.

BNP was established by a military dictator; but it fought for restoration of democracy against another military dictator, Hussain Mohammad Ershad. However, this fight for democracy was jointly fought by BNP and AL. The same

parties, during the last 15 years (1991-2006), have reached a stage when they no longer trust each other. Let us not deal with the question as to who is mainly responsible for this situation.

Apart from mistrust, these parties do not have mutual respect. It is rather funny that they try to belittle each other's founders. This is resulting in a division of the population, an ominous sign for this new nation. Their mutual mistrust has resulted in the addition of the provision (in the constitution) for a non-party caretaker government to conduct fair and free election.

Now we are facing the problem of reforming the provision for caretaker government. And because of the mutual suspicion of these par-

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ties we see some sort of outside interference in our internal politics. Certainly not a happy sign. Mutual suspicion has reached such a level that our major parties can barely decide on a venue for their political discussion.

We hope that a national election will be held on schedule, and that it will be free and fair. Despite the volatility of Bangladesh politics, we may consider the findings of Nazim Kamran Choudhury (DS October 6) as impressive. Mr Choudhury has

himself admitted that due to paucity of funds he could not make a full study of the Bangladesh political scenario. Despite this, the study has good depth. Like any other study this one could be further improved if it could indicate the reasons for his conclusions more clearly and elaborately. However, we are inclined to accept much of his observations, such as:

The voters are disenchanted with the whole political system. That Ershad did serious damage to BNP

by luring away a major part of it, and after 1991, BNP began to change with influx of members from new rich business community and retired bureaucrats. That by 2001 the BNP became devoid of politics and it has become an association of interest groups. That Begum Zia's election campaign, based on her claim of development work and bogey of "foreign hands," may not prove to be catchy. To a voter, development work is less important than the prices of essential items, or availability of

uninterrupted electricity or drinking water, and breaking away of Dr. B. Chowdhury, and probably Col. Oli Ahmed, from BNP may encourage a large number of lesser dissidents to leave BNP. That Awami League has been able to overcome its bad name as Baksalites; and the understanding between Bikalpa Dhara and it may be very useful for attracting the attention of BNP dissidents.

Mr Choudhury has tried to remain as dispassionate and neutral as possible. However, it appears

that he has ignored certain other factors for a possible change of regime in 2007. Despite so much drum-beating about development work by the 4-party alliance their grievous failures in the following areas may be the main factors for their losing the next election:

Beside checking regular outage of electricity, and extra-ordinary price hike of essential commodities, its high command failed to take punitive actions against the corrupt ministers and some lawmakers. The alliance government failed to choose the right members for the jumbo cabinet and reform the administration. Politicisation can never improve efficiency, but right-sizing does. Highly corrupt bureaucracy only tarnished the image of

the chairperson.

There may be a significant increase in the number of independent candidates winning seats in the parliament because of intra-party feuds in major parties, and the increasing attention of voters on the personality of the candidate rather than on the strength of the party.

However clearer picture about the election may be seen only after completion of the on-going dialogue between AL and BNP. The people of Bangladesh have attained maturity; they are losing confidence in politicians, not in politics. No longer will they tolerate the mischief of politicians.

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