

The monga problem

Take ameliorative steps urgently

AGAINST the background of our consumerist culture that is clearly in evidence, the news that a large section of people in the northern area of the country are suffering an agonising near-famine situation comes as tormenting and sordid news to us. The situation is made even more poignant in the holy month of Ramadan by the fact that when some are striving to survive the monga that has been with them for weeks now, and will be with them for the next few months, any intervention to ameliorate their condition is conspicuous by its absence.

Monga is a recurring feature in this part of the country that lasts up to several months when there is serious scarcity of food. The interregnum between the last harvest in September and the next in November is the crucial period when there is no crop to harvest and no form of employment to provide for the people of this region. That being the case, we fail to understand why no sustainable measures have been put in place to help the locals see through this period of severe want. The affected people of the region are flocking to the urban areas creating pressure on the towns. And in a crisis situation like this not much of NGO activity is in evidence either.

The affected areas are isolated pockets, but surprisingly there are no local arrangements for a buffer stock to tide over the period of scarcity, neither is there any scope for employment for these people. Under such circumstances, till such time appropriate projects are developed, which should have been in place long ago, to employ these people locally, there is a need for bringing the most marginalised under the Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) scheme on an urgent basis. Special projects must also be undertaken to implement Food for Work (FFW) programme which give some respectability to the people in earning their livelihood without having to beg or to flock the cities to eke out a living.

Not only must the administration move fast to see that the situation is addressed most promptly, particularly given the forthcoming Eid, we also urge upon it to undertake longer-term measures to tackle this recurring feature.

Vulnerable businessmen

Clear the port city of kidnapers

THE law enforcers have apparently failed to make any dent as far as the cases of kidnapping in the port city of Chittagong are concerned. The abductors hold businessmen to ransom and some of the victims failing to meet their demands were killed, or their whereabouts are still unknown. The latest victim is a businessman, Abul Kalam, whose family has been asked to pay Tk 1 crore to get him released.

Well-organised groups of criminals having the clout to thwart police action are operating in the port city. A number of people have been kidnapped and one may recall that business magnet Jamaluddin was murdered by one such group. Reports suggest that some of the cases were settled after the kidnapers' demand was met. The victims in such cases did not seek help from the law enforcers, which clearly indicates that people have lost confidence in the efficiency of the police. The question is, can they be really blamed for not having enough confidence in the police? The success stories of the law enforcers are far outnumbered by the huge piles of the unresolved cases where the police could make little or no headway. Even in the case of Abul Kalam the police have come nowhere near a breakthrough in more than a week.

There is equally horrific news from Chittagong about the way the killer groups are operating. They have invented new ways of committing murder that make it difficult for the police to follow their trails.

It is really disquieting to learn that most people believe that the rise of the crime syndicates has a lot to do with the support that they get from big political parties. Indeed, it is not easy to accept the truth that police are being outmaneuvered so easily by the kidnapers. It only suggests that the criminals are drawing their strength from the sources beyond the reach of the law. It also bolsters the widely held view that law enforcers may have become too corrupt to successfully launch an anti-crime drive.

The port city is the commercial hub of the country and, as such, it is doubly important to protect the businessmen from the hands of the kidnapers thriving on their helplessness.

Should we call poor women *fakirni*, sir?



SHAHNOOR WAHID

DEAR finance minister, we were appalled to hear you say: "*Fakirni hatey mobile diey ...*" which in plain English means: "It is not true that the country has progressed because you have given mobile phone to beggar women."

You said this in a public place obviously reacting to the news of Prof Yunus and Grameen Bank getting the Nobel Peace Prize. You may have a point in your argument, but what distressed this writer and many more like him was the disparaging use of the word *fakirni* (beggar woman) to actually mean the hard working, poor but honest women of this country who borrow money from Grameen Bank.

By calling them *fakirni* you have made a condescending allusion to their economic condition; yourself sitting at a socially and economically advantageous position. The choice of word clearly exposed your feudal mindset and deliberate division of our society along the economic front.

Such use of words, such dis-

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

Our question to you is: are all poor women in Bangladesh beggars? It does not seem so. All around us we see them doing menial work, like breaking stones under a scorching sun, cutting earth, working in the paddy fields, working in brick kilns, and so on. They work from dawn to dusk to earn an honest living and at the same time take care of the family. Don't you see them, sir?

dainful equivalence, would be condemned by a socially and economically powerful group as blatant insinuation, and it would not go unchallenged. But our poor women are powerless having no voice to challenge big people. Through using the word in question you have proved once again that poor women get little respect in society from the high and mighty ones.

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Don't you see them, sir? Maybe you don't because you travel in a car with tinted windows. Maybe their collective earning does not help you in inflating the GDP to suit your purpose. Ah, it reminds us that you once called the garment workers mere *darjees* (tailors). But that's all forgotten and forgiven by the people.

To go back to our point, even if a poor woman is forced to beg, shouldn't you, as a people's representative and as a senior and respected citizen, call her a poor or destitute woman rather than a *fakirni*? Don't poor women deserve some respect? We know politicians of the present genre have foul mouth and engage in rampant *tui-tokari* in front of their children and supporters, and talk in extremely derogatory language about others.

But all along we were under the impression that you were different from them. Occasionally we have heard words of wisdom coming from your mouth and we have also seen you becoming critical of your own party policies and policy makers. But your oblique reference to our poor women who virtually have snatched the Nobel Prize this year has shocked us profoundly.

We have few more questions to ask you, sir. Are *fakiris*, or women beggars, sent by the Creator from above, or are they created by societies created by the politicians? Are they not victims of a flawed economic system

that ends up creating numerous *fakiris* every year? So, who is at fault here, sir?

The hapless poor women whom people like you never look at with respectful eyes, or you and I who have connived to build a patriarchal society where we would limit the role of women? And where we would draw a line for the women across the economic turf so that most of them cannot reach above the *fakirni* level?

The other question is: what have you and your government done in last five years to help the poor women come out of the poverty cycle? To quote your good self: "You cannot alleviate poverty by giving a goat or some ducks." How true. But that's exactly what your government did in the past five years. Evidently, nothing better could come out of the planning table of your government. You have claimed some success in addressing the issue of women in poverty but most of it is on paper rather than in real life. As the finance minister you have prepared budget every year, which has only helped the rich become



filthy rich.

In Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries of the world, we see cars worth one crore taka each on our badly maintained roads. We see millions in black money being whitened and millions being siphoned away under various names. We see thugs, drug dealers, professional killers, and black-marketers finding safe haven in political parties. But we do not hear you utter any derogatory words about them. You do not question how those "sons of *fakirni*" became millionaires overnight.

It is unfortunate that our politicians never care to impose censorship on their own tongue when

they speak about people they do not like. They indulge in verbal invectives of the worst kind, thereby setting examples of deplorable crassness before the nation, especially the young generation. Unless politicians learn to respect the people, irrespective of their economic condition, they will never become sincere about their welfare. Their feudal attitude will surface every now and then despite all the pro-poor slogans.

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Prized inheritance



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

WINNING of Nobel Peace Prize by Professor Yunus and Grameen Bank has suddenly catapulted Bangladesh from a catalogue of disaster to a country brimming with self-confidence and pride. Pride because of the achievement recognized, though belatedly, by the entire world that the poor can be counted upon to contribute to their own and also to national development, and self-confidence because as Professor Yunus has so emphatically declared: we can achieve.

The contagious exuberance now sweeping the country has put the politicians, particularly the governing coalition, in a difficult position to play truant any longer as the entire nation is waiting with bated breath for the announcement that demands made by the opposition combine for holding a free and fair election have been met.

If the talks fail then the country could plunge into darkness perhaps comparable to the horror

that countries with failed governance like Sudan or Somalia experienced during endless lawlessness and turmoil that engulfed these countries. Such despair is within the realm of possibility if one were to go by the picture drawn of possible unraveling of North Korean regime premised very recently by Professor Robert Kaplan in which the collapse of the ruling regime could give rise to independent fiefs informally controlled by warlords along with widespread corruption to circumvent a failing central government through resistance against the central government and the ultimate fracture of the regime.

Though Professor Yunus has brought a breath of fresh air to a Bangladesh otherwise widely perceived as the most corrupt nation on earth, besieged by confrontational politics, afflicted by extreme politicization of almost all organs of the state, suffering from deteriorating law and order situation, infested with Islamic extremism that is deter-

mined to establish an Islamist government to be run in accordance with their own interpretation of the religion, and no less importantly, as a friendless country in the world.

Why should Justice KM Hasan insist on becoming the next head of the caretaker government when it is crystal clear that a large number of people would prefer a consensus head of the CTG? Why should the present CEC and his deputies cling on to their posts when they have palpably failed to prepare a non-controversial voter list which is a *sin qua non* for holding any election? How can one not feel embarrassed faced with the incessant call for resignation of the election commissioners and for the next probable CTG head to decline to accept if he is called upon to take up his responsibility?

That no one is indispensable has been ordained by nature through the loss of immortality by human beings. More than fifty years ago US Justice Frankfurter

had written that a society in which each is willing to surrender only that for which he can see a personal equivalent is not a society at all; it is a group already in the process of dissolution and only Bedlam will emerge from a regime of unbridled individualism.

But Professor Yunus's lesson to us in the midst of stifling anxiety about the politico-economic future of the country holds the promise that the sacrifices made by the people in 1952, the victory of 1954 (though nullified in 1958), the revolt against the military regimes in the sixties, the war of independence of 1971, and reinstallation of democracy in 1991 would not go in vain.

His characterization of the nature of this Nobel prize as being totally different from the ones awarded earlier in that this year's prize is a recognition that marginal group of people in our society who are not only poor but are overwhelmingly women also count and his conviction that Bangladeshis can succeed are refreshing in the

GOING DEEPER

The country wants a change. Indeed craves for a change. The country wants good governance. The people want security, the minority community do not want to live in fear of Islamic fundamentalists, the people want water, electricity, consumer goods at affordable prices. The poor want dignity of life. The ultra-poor want to be graduated from their existing decrepitude. These are not tall orders.

backdrop of lack of good governance which has portrayed us to the world as an irretrievably corrupt and inefficient people unable to achieve.

If revolutions are basically mass-based affairs of great magnitude, brought on and carried through mobilization of masses, then it would be prudent to remind ourselves of Kansat, Phulbari, Barapukuria, Shanir Ankhra, and restive workers in the readymade garments sector that these spontaneous outburst of the people without political machination do not take the form of episodic occurrences through coalescence of political, social, and cultural actors.

It is unacceptable that when international organizations assess that China by 2040 could be the largest economy in the world, with India becoming the third largest economy, turning the 21st century into an Asian century, that Bangladesh will remain mired in underdevelopment, having a minuscule part of the population living in opulence while the great majority will just eke out a sub-human level of existence.

Instead, we should try to pursue an egalitarian system akin to what Joseph Stiglitz calls "moral growth" i.e. "growth that is sustainable, that increases living standard not just today but for future generations as well, and that leads to a more tolerant, open society (where) the benefits of growth are shared equitably, creating a society with more social

justice and solidarity."

The people in power set to ride into the sunset would be committing a grave mistake if they consider the existing disequilibria in parliament as *carte blanche* to refuse to absorb the dissenting views which by now have become popular demands and obstinately continue to "stay the course" which can only bring ruination to the country.

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These are not tall orders. These are the basic minimum that a people should expect from their elected government whose kleptocracy should be bounded and corruption be called to account. Unless these are done immediately the nation could implode with incalculable consequences. No one's ego can be more important in the face of a country's impending disaster.

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Election bonanza for bureaucracy



ANM NURUL HAQUE

BY THE NUMBERS

The selection of officers for promotion superseding the seniors is sparking agitation in administration. A large number of aspirants complain that an influential quarter hand-picked the officers, considering their loyalty to the BNP and its major coalition partner Jamaat-e-Islami.

finalized their recommendation for another round of promotion of 14 additional secretaries to be full-fledged secretaries before the caretaker government takes over power. Moreover 211 assistant secretaries are going to be promoted soon to fill up the positions vacated by the promoted officers.

Earlier, the government on July 3 promoted 153 deputy secretaries to joint secretary, superseding seniors and depriving around 100 eligible officers. Similarly, five additional secretaries were promoted to be full-fledged secretaries. The selection of officers for promotion superseding the seniors is sparking agitation in administration. A large number of aspirants complain that an influential quarter hand-picked the officers, considering their loyalty to the BNP and its

major coalition partner Jamaat-e-Islami.

The government also promoted 378 senior assistant secretaries to the post of deputy secretary on January 26, ignoring about 200 officers having requisite qualification for promotion. After the promotion of 378 senior assistant secretaries, the number of deputy secretaries to become OSD raised to 463, as there were no deputy secretary level vacant posts. Now, with another mass promotion of 332 senior assistant secretaries on October 15, more than 600 deputy secretaries have become OSDs.

The number of contractual appointments has also increased and most of such appointments and extension of contracts are made on the basis of their political allegiance. It has been alleged that

most of the secretaries and additional secretaries getting contractual appointment or extension of contracts are inclined either to BNP or Jamaat-e-Islami. Such appointments are greatly hampering smooth functioning of the administration.

The BNP-led coalition government at the very end of its tenure has gone for mass promotion of civil servants entirely on political considerations, apparently for taking them on its side during the election. According to a source in the establishment ministry, a total number of 2,380 officials were promoted in the different tiers of bureaucracy during the tenure of this government and the mass promotion of 332 SASs was the 7th phase of its kind to distribute election bonanza.

The mass promotions in the civil service have resulted in the record number of officers getting OSD status having no works for years together. Where there are 865 deputy secretary level posts, the number of deputy secretaries has exceeded 1,600 with the last promotion of 332 senior assistant secretaries to the posts of deputy secretaries on October 15. Most of these officers will be kept in situ while others will remain OSDs.

The other dimension of such mass promotion is that a large number of officers have got promotion on political consideration while many of them having requisite qualification were deprived. It is quite a pity that, a good numbers of SASs who were involved in the ACR tempering were also promoted. This has been breeding frustration and resentment among an increasing number of officers to have its chain reactions. Country's bureaucracy is likely to come under keen public scrutiny due to such promotions.

Bangladesh inherited this bureaucratic system introduced by the British ruler. The civil service in this sub-continent under the British regime was regulated as per the

terms and conditions laid down in the India Act, 1935, which contained fair and beneficial provisions aiming to protect the interest of civil servants for performing their duties neutrally. But the civil servants in Bangladesh, unlike the civil servants in the neighbouring countries like India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka failed to maintain the political neutrality.

The political neutrality of the civil servants in Bangladesh is also reinforced by rules restricting their political activities. Section 30 of the Government Servants Conduct Rules of 1979 states: "No government servant shall bring, or attempt to bring political or other outside influence, directly or indirectly, to bear on the government or any government servant in support of any claim arising in connection with his employment."

Section 32 of the said rules holds: "Contravention of any of these rules shall be construed as misconduct within the meaning of the Government Servants (Discipline and Appeal) Rules, 1985 and a government servant found guilty of such contravention shall render himself liable to disciplinary action under the aforesaid rules."

But Sections 30 and 32 of the Government Servants Conduct Rules are honoured more in breach than in observance. Not a single instance, however, can be cited in which a civil servant was awarded punishment for breach of conduct in his involvement in political activities. Many of the high government officers are now found to be engaged in extra-official activities that are quite political in nature and neutrality of civil service is spoiled in these ways.

Bangladesh does not have as yet any civil service act or any other law regulating the civil service. The Government Servants Conduct Rules of 1979, the Government Servants (Special Provisions) Ordinance 1979, the Government Servants (Discipline and Appeal) Rules 1985, and the Public Servants Dismissed on Conviction Ordinance 1985 contain the important rules regulating the civil service. But these rules and ordinances do not provide protection to the civil servants from being repressed or victimized by the political party in power.

Political neutrality in the bureaucracy is indispensable for its smooth functioning as it is the most

stable and vital component to good governance. Clearly these mass promotions are carried out with the motive of reaping political gain in the forthcoming election. Such mass promotions must be ceased forthwith to put the bureaucracy on the right track.

The frequent mass promotion on political consideration has a demoralizing effect across the tiers of bureaucracy. The system of bureaucracy is bound to be spoiled if partisan loyalty rather than merit becomes the criteria for promotion. The civil servants of all descriptions are the servants of the republic and not of the party in power. They are not expected to be loyal to the party in power but required to serve the government of different political ideology without being partisan to anyone. If the process of politicization of bureaucracy continues unabated, its fall-out will be felt for years to come.

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