

Prof. Sen on public healthcare

Set priorities based on our needs

SPEAKING at the launch of Bangladesh Health Watch's "The State of Health in Bangladesh Report 2006", Professor Amartya Sen made the observation that "privatisation limits the majority of people's access to basic public healthcare services." The point made by the Noble laureate deserves to be examined in all its ramifications.

We are indeed happy that the Noble laureate during his current visit to Bangladesh has given his insight on a number of other issues of vital concern facing the country, with public healthcare services being one of them. Prof. Sen has rightly pointed out that the "affordability" is the prime factor in gaining access to healthcare services by the majority of the people.

As much as we do appreciate and understand the concerns expressed by him and the suggestions made, we would also like to point out that the rise of the private sector in public healthcare services has a different dimension in Bangladesh compared to other countries. The growth of the private sector in healthcare services in Bangladesh is a relatively recent phenomenon. The growth of the sector here has come about mainly due to poor services at government managed facilities.

It is therefore our belief that, at least for now, the private and the public sector should run simultaneously in providing healthcare services, especially until such time the public healthcare services develop their capacities and are free from mismanagement and corruption. Besides in assessing the situation it should also be remembered that adequate and quality healthcare and other medical services in general are a costly enterprise all over the world anyway.

The observations made by Prof. Sen deserve serious considerations, especially from a humanitarian standpoint. At some point of time we should and must strike a healthy balance between the private sector and the public sector facilities. It is not a question of either/or, rather the two sectors should operate efficiently to offer better medicare facilities to people and complement each other.

Clashes continue

Rein in the unruly elements

THE last day of nomination filing (Dec. 26) turned to be a violent one, as supporters of two rival candidates of the BNP and AL clashed in Segunbagicha in the city, leaving more than 300 people injured.

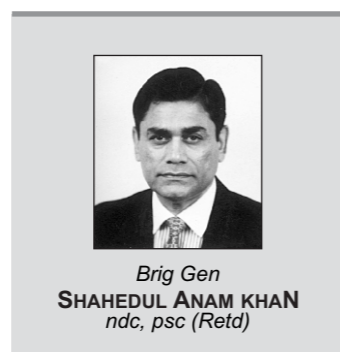
That is really cause for concern, since the parties will have to coexist side by side for more than three weeks before the election. Their aggressive mood was far too evident in the way they attacked each other, though there was no reason behind this kind of muscle-flexing and show of strength. It seems the activists of the two major parties are pretty much convinced that they have to overpower the rivals in the streets in order to get the upper hand in the election. What is always noticeable in this kind of violence is that neither side shows an iota of concern for the people who have to suffer because of senseless hooliganism. They seem to have taken it for granted that whatever they do will have to be endorsed and accepted by the people matter how big is the price.

People have suffered a lot during the last two months of political agitation which primarily revolved around the antagonistic relationship between the BNP and the AL. However, they felt a bit relieved with the news of the AL-led 14-party alliance finally going to the polls. Unfortunately, their worries are far from over.

What is needed now is a strong message from the parties and their leaders that they will maintain peace under all circumstances. The commitment must be clear and loud and the leaders should take a firm stand against their activists trying to clinch the issue through applying force. The candidates must also try their best to pacify the unruly elements whose activities may threaten peaceful holding of the election. The spirit should be one of accommodation, not confrontation.

Finally, we would appeal to the parties to duly recognise the right of citizens to live in peace. So far voters' concerns have hardly been reflected in the programmes launched by the big two parties. We hope there will be a welcome change in this respect in the run-up to the polls.

A counter-terrorism strategy for Bangladesh



WE are still grappling with the issue of formulating a strategy for countering terrorism in Bangladesh. At least that was the impression one got after attending a two-day seminar on "A strategy for countering terrorism in Bangladesh," organised by the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, recently. The BEI must be commended for its efforts to bring the issue to the public forum. The discourse primarily exposed the hurdles we are likely to face in the all-too-important exercise of counter-terrorism strategy formulation.

It is worth putting on record that the UN has adopted a strategy to combat terrorism through a UNGA resolution on Sep 8. And the statement by the President of the 61st session of the General Assembly launching the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy on September 19: "The passing of the resolution on the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy represents a common testament that we, the United Nations, will face terrorism head-on, and that terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, committed by whomever, wherever and for whatever purposes, must be condemned and shall not be tolerated," reflects the commitment of the 192 countries of the UN to see the end of terrorism in the world.

However, there is very little public knowledge about anything substantive that has been done by the government towards formulat-

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

To fight terrorism is not for the governments alone. A good counter-terrorism strategy must take on board all the political parties and all the institutions in the country, both private and public. It must cut across party lines. The plan must be dynamic and flexible enough to ensure change as well as continuity. And for that, setting up a National Security Council is worth considering.



ing a strategy in line with that suggested by the UN. Perhaps Bangladesh is not the only country that finds itself in such a situation. The phenomenon appeared suddenly with a bang, literally, and our exposure to it was abrupt but not entirely unexpected. We were caught off-guard because we were not prepared to accept that the religious extremists did, indeed, have roots in the country, loose as they may be, and that they were capable of projecting threats to the very structure of the nation. It seems that we are also undecided still as to the source of the major threat; whether it will be the Islamic radicals, who have appeared recently, or the ideological terror-

ists who have the most potent capacity to influence our socio-political-economic fabric? I, for one, hesitate to subscribe to the idea of classifying terrorists as political, ideological etc. A terrorist, whatever his motivation, is propelled by an ideology, whether it is derived from the scriptures or from a particular political or economic philosophy. Their aims and objectives are the same, although the tactical methods that might be employed by these groups in achieving their aims may vary in character. Experts and scholars on the subject of terrorism are of the opinion that the degree of violence employed by a group motivated by religion would be more intensive

than one motivated by a political philosophy. (There are explanations for why that is so, but one may not necessarily accept those.) The state of denial, a psychological state brought upon the administration by the abruptness of the event, was also the result of the political equation in the country, the Islamist parties forming an important part of the ruling alliance but, perhaps, having more influence on policies than their number of seats in the parliament accorded them. The general opinion among the observers is that much of the denial was the result of the pressure from this group, whose ultimate links with the captured members of the Islamic radical group were exposed

after their capture in late 2005. There are several things that came out starkly in the seminar that are worth dwelling upon. There was consensus on the need to arrive at a common definition of the term terrorism. When people are made victims of indiscriminate bombings, not only by the non-state but also by the state actors, can one readily concur with those that feel that arriving at a commonly accepted definition of terrorism is a fool's errand? However, there is merit in the argument that unless we know what we are up against we cannot devise an appropriate strategy for combating it. Our preferred means of fighting can only be fixed if we know what it is that we are going to counter. Thus, one is not surprised to hear the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan calling upon the heads of state in July to arrive at an acceptable definition of the phenomenon. In fact, he had even gone so far as to call for formulating a "good definition of terrorism." Coming to terms with a working definition has evaded the world since 1973 when three subcommittees were set up by the UN ad-hoc committee to "examine the definition, causes, and prevention of terrorism." However, it would be costly in terms of human lives if our actions were to be constrained by a lack of proper definition of terrorism. We should address terrorism for what it is, use of violence for attaining political objectives by inducing fear. We should, however, arrive at a working definition, if not on a globally accepted one, to confront terrorist groups. There was also an acknowledgement of the need to define the threat to us. To suggest that the Islamists will be the only threat in the future would set us on the wrong track. There is the need to take into cognisance the other

elements, particularly those that are motivated by leftist ideologies that have as much threat potential as the others. In the view of senior government functionaries in India it is not the jihadists, but the leftists led by the naxalites, that pose the greatest threat to India's internal security. And given that these elements are also served by a common link in the region, established by the Coordination Committee of Maoist Parties and Organizations of South Asia to coordinate their activities in the region, it must receive our due consideration. At least we ought to prioritise the expected threats. Each will need a different strategy to combat. The issue of new legislation to fight terrorism was a matter of debate in the seminar also. My main concern is that when we have appropriate laws to address the phenomenon legally what qualitative difference can one expect from new legislations, either in the operational aspect or on the legal side, that we are not able to achieve at the moment, and which would make counter-terrorism more effective? New laws do not necessarily accord more efficiency, but proper application of those will. The experience of India with TADA and POTA should be good indicator in this regard. To fight terrorism is not for the governments alone. A good counter-terrorism strategy must take on board all the political parties and all the institutions in the country, both private and public. It must cut across party lines. The plan must be dynamic and flexible enough to ensure change as well as continuity. And for that, setting up a National Security Council is worth considering.

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Rethinking Election 2007

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According to an estimate, AL and allies were engaged in an intense movement for 527 days. Around 100 people died in the movement. Thousands of crores of taka have gone down the drain due to hartals, blockades and so on.

But what has been the achievement? AL and allies can count some achievements in departure of three persons. But did the suffering people, in whose name AL and allies waged the movement, gain anything in the process? Has the Election Commission (EC) been strengthened? Has it not been further weakened instead? Has the Caretaker Government (CTG) been neutral?

On the contrary, has it not been further biased with the departure of four competent and committed advisers? This is not to mean that the present CTG is not capable of conducting a fair election. But, is it really neutral in accordance with

Despite sufferings of various sorts, there was not an intolerable attitude to the movement in the citizenry. Many people were ready to sacrifice for the AL's agitation in the hope that the results would be meaningful. But what has AL and allies delivered? Has AL not made things worse instead by signing a highly controversial deal with religion based Khelafat-e-Majlish? Though AL's alliance with JP is also very questionable, AL's abrupt surrender of secularism to Khelafat-e-Majlish points to the desperation AL is now feeling for an electoral victory.

the yardstick AL and allies had been preaching even a few days back? Then, were only three persons the obstacles to a fair election in Bangladesh? Notably, BNP leaders' regularly and emphatically remarked that AL would ultimately go for elections.

Though it is difficult to say what will happen following the election, our democracy seems to be safe at least for the time being because of this attitude by AL. But the moot point that has been raised by many is that, AL could have gone for elections two months back. AL can justify the movement in their parlance.

I, however, do not know how they will justify the sufferings they caused to the people in the process. In fact, AL and allies got many sympathizers in their move-

ment who want basic institutions such as Election Commission, Neutral Caretaker Government, civil administration and other bodies to be more efficient and strengthened.

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But what has AL and allies delivered? Has AL not made things worse instead by signing a highly controversial deal with religion based Khelafat-e-Majlish? Though AL's alliance with JP is also very questionable, AL's abrupt surrender of secularism to Khelafat-e-Majlish points to the desperation AL is now feeling

for an electoral victory. Don't you however think, AL could easily have avoided such an ideological hara-kiri only if it had concentrated on capitalising on the BNP alliance's incumbency disadvantage as well phenomenal failures in power sector, price control, corruption and militancy? Arguably, elections in Bangladesh are profoundly influenced by immediate public sentiment, which was clearly against the ruling political parties two months back. I am, however, doubtful whether that sentiment remains the same today.

Moreover, as AL's movement did not succeed in delivering anything concrete to the people, the horrific scenes during the last few days of October might now start looking all the more grati-

ous to the people. It is also difficult to predict that those will not count against AL and allies in the final analysis along with the negative impacts of AL's unholy alliance with fundamental political parties. May I, then, ask why BNP and AL should cause sufferings to the people in the name of democracy, ideology and so on while they can stoop to anything for power? What is the harm in forming a permanent coalition government of thieves and thugs -- sorry for using this term which has struck me for the fact that many of two major political parties were behind the unholy move of Supreme Court stay against the High Court directive for declaring the MP candidates' personal information - to loot public money? People wanted a change for the better through the AL alliance. But, can people be really confident if the current tendencies of AL are any indication? Many know that Nazim Kamran Choudhury in his outstanding analysis and predictions on Elections, 2007 -- printed in The Daily Star on October 6, 2006 -- pointed out a debacle for BNP-JI-JP (JP is, however, now with AL). On October 8, I, in my article, did

comment that the reversal was not due to the fact that the then current opposition parties deserved to win big for their effective role against the misrule of the incumbents during their five years tenure, it was more for the reason that the masses had still to get a viable political alternative. However, today, after about 3 months, I have a kind of feeling that Mr. Kamran and others will, perhaps, have to go for more surveys. I think the changed scenario at least requires some more analyses to project a novel prediction regarding the election 2007. Notably, Kamran's survey had found 53% undecided voters. Don't you think that this figure might increase dramatically in a fresh survey in view of two-months long unending machinations of BNP alliance plus unproductive agitation of AL combine in the sense that it has not been able to bring about positive changes that would have long-standing effects? Don't you think that even a silent no-vote movement might gain momentum as no-confidence motion to the political and ideological bankrupts of all complexions? Kazi SM Khasrul Alam Quddusi is Assistant Professor, Department of Public Administration, University of Chittagong.

Electioneering facts or fiction

If 20 percent of the 140 million people act as the eyes and ears of the election, it will be 28 million people watching. We have the power of the people to use. The importance of this election for the nation is huge. Without waiting for 300 or so foreign observers to come and watch us, let us get organized and watch our own election.

MAWUDUR RAHMAN

THESE days it is difficult to distinguish between facts and fiction. There are so many distortions of facts in newspaper articles regarding any issue that a less-involved reader may shun reading newspaper articles except for amusement.

For example, a recent article by Dr. Dewan in The Daily Star reported survey results on BNP wrong doings. Dr. Dewan's opinion and conclusions did not bother me. Most people would even agree that BNP unleashed a rule of autocracy wearing the cloak of democracy during the five years of their rule.

To come to this conclusion, a scholar does not have to take refuge in rigorous social science methodology. He used Likert's scale to measure some undefined social constructs, and reported

averages of the responses on a ten-point scale. Social science methodology outlines pre-conditions for using Likert's scales. I don't want to labor on the method. I would simply comment that Dr. Dewan ignored the principles of social science research, but still reported the results in a 10-point scale and conveniently termed it as unscientific.

All opinion surveys report the questions asked, number of respondents and their locations (like urban, rural etc), and the percentage of error with the achieved results. Nothing of this sort has been included in the survey. Needless to say that these types of political polls ask dichotomous questions with answers as "yes" or "no." Therefore, I do not know what anyone would get from the reported results, except anti-BNP amusement.

These types of political exigencies have become the energy converter of our nation, relegating the need for facts to the periphery. Not only have many scholars and pundits lost their eagerness to report and use facts. This phenomenon has also vitiated the social, economic, and political environments.

In this uncontrolled race of mud slinging, and in the war of words, we hardly acknowledge any good deeds done by the party or people we disapprove of. In the past, all parties indulged in many unscrupulous activities but, at the same time, they also did some good things. But one would hardly hear from them any word of appreciation for their opponents.

In another arena, some socially rejected politicians, by seeking accommodation with any party for political advantages, have done

so much damage to the integrity of the profession that they have turned it into political prostitution. The political doors must be slammed shut on the faces of those who acted against democracy and the people of Bangladesh. Instead, we have reinstated, or are trying to reinstate, them as if they have no history.

In the same vein, it is not uncommon to hear complaints that rajakars and people with no connection with the liberation war are masquerading as freedom fighters, and are enjoying the fruits of the sacrifice of the men and women who lost their lives. Many real freedom fighters are now finding it hard to make both ends meet by selling tea in a small corner stall. We hardly want to know about them because we are afraid of facts.

One cannot say anything that goes against any of the parties with much muscle power lest he or she is branded as unpatriotic, anti-development, anti-Islam, or even risk his/her life or property. Then who will talk about the pain and suffering of the millions who are

not banner-carrying supporters of any of the parties?

The politicians are not guided by any political norms, the intellectuals refuse to provide intellectual energy when it is most needed, the attorneys allow rampaging of the highest seat of law of the country, the students love to be on the streets rather than in the classrooms, professors hardly get time to update their lecture notes, and the civil servants have become the servants of the political bosses. One may go on. The situation is neither amusing nor amazing. Only a sad commentary of the painful reality we are in.

Is the situation that bad? Not at all. I am an optimist. There is always a brighter side. I think the country is holding together and is moving forward primarily because of two professions: a) the news media and b) the business people. I have seen throughout this difficult period, and in many adverse situations, that the businesspersons of the country did not give up even in the midst of chaos and catastrophe.

I also have seen young men and women in the news media, (both in

print and television) showing tremendous dedication by holding a strong stance for freedom of the press. This is the hope for the country as long as they hold on to what they believe in. I suggest that all other professions learn a lesson from them, put their acts together, and get busy doing what they are supposed to do.

Once said in a column, for a different daily, that everyone in all professions has active responsibilities to achieve a free and fair election. In this election, the nation needs independent and honest candidates in large numbers, challenging the old style and corrupt politicians, and striking a hard blow against their degenerating politics.

If 20 percent of the 140 million people act as the eyes and ears of the election, it will be 28 million people watching. We have the power of the people to use. The importance of this election for the nation is huge. Without waiting for 300 or so foreign observers to come and watch us, let us get organized and watch our own election. In the US, there are Political

Action Committees (PAC) representing different professions and businesses. There are political action committees for black Americans, different industries, women rights, religion based committees etc. PAC contributes to the candidates' election campaign, financially and otherwise. When the candidates are elected, they represent the causes of the supporters. In our country, there is no PAC. That is why the causes of business and industry and other significant constituencies are not appropriately represented in the parliament and in the political scene.

There is a way out. We can kill two birds with one stone. To ensure mass support for the election, the business federations should nominate their own candidates for selected seats in strategic locations like, Chittagong, Khulna, and EPZ areas. In this way, they keep the balance of power in these areas, before they face uncalled for hartals, and also have representations in the parliament.

The NGOs should nominate their own candidates to protect their interests in locations where

they have intensive activities, and so should the doctors, engineers, and women's groups. Others may consider these alternatives to let people elect honest and qualified candidates, bypassing the undemocratic nomination processes of the political parties.

Dr Yunus ought to take the lead and not rest on his laurels. Words of wisdom and good wishes are necessary, but not sufficient, to help the nation overcome the crisis. A group of foreign observers are coming to monitor the election. They should also be carefully monitored. Like everything else, we should remember that no help comes free. There are open or hidden agendas in everything people want to do for others.

The amount of interest the US and British ambassadors are showing must worry any independent minded citizen. If we cannot take control and organize ourselves, the foreign powers will be our virtual bosses, dictating the terms of conducting the business of the nation. Caveat emptor for concerned citizens.

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