

BTMC and Profitability

The decision by the Bangladesh Textile Mills Corporation (BTMC) to put 12 of its executives on special duty (meaning relieved of duties) would seem like 'drastic actions'. But in reality, BTMC has gone less than half-way in tackling what is undoubtedly a major crisis facing one of the largest state-owned enterprises. A glance at statistics released by the BTMC itself would suffice to give an idea of the current situation: of the Corporation's 45 units, only 29 recorded a profit in September; and BTMC's total profit for the same month fell short of target by a staggering 87 per cent. With statistics like that to contend with, any decision maker would be compelled to contemplate far-reaching reforms, including wholesale changes of personnel, which is exactly what BTMC will have to eventually do if its units are to stop being a burden on the taxpayers.

BTMC's troubles obviously go deep into the way its administration, finance, production and marketing are managed. The management's relations with labour is also something that has to figure in plans to overhaul the industry, because the necessary reforms may well involve off-loading of surplus labour, if any. The question of efficiency naturally comes at the top of the agenda, with utilisation of existing capacity being the central issue to be addressed. Plant modernisation, with installation of new equipment and upgrading of existing ones, is all very fine, but unless wasteful practices are got rid of and units made efficient, then extra money invested too would go down the drain.

This will call not only for a change in management attitude and practices — since the current way of doing things has demonstratively failed to produce the goods — but the Corporation must also become accountable for its performances. The question of accountability affects all nationalised industries and it is incumbent on the Jatiya Sangsads to conduct aggressive monitoring of the financial health of the state sector. Although BTMC is an autonomous body, parliament should be able to perform a watchdog duty in the greater public interest.

In order to attain profitability, BTMC must shed its "government agency" mentality and adopt the psychology of a privately owned company. In other words, the idea that it would not matter if the Corporation did not make any profit because the taxpayer is forever ready and willing to bankroll it, must be banished once and for all. All BTMC units must become accountable for their market performances and live according to what they produce. Since failure would mean going bankrupt and out of business leaving hundreds unemployed, the government should immediately take on a comprehensive reform programme, including modernisation before cutting them loose. The reforms must go well beyond making managers OSD or shifting them to other, equally cushy and unaccountable posts.

One way is for the state to stop appointing civil servants to top industrial management posts, since these bureaucrats bring their old habits to new areas i.e. treat business concerns as if they were some government directorate where the concept of the market is non-existent and notions of productivity and efficiency unheard of. From now on, the government should appoint men or women with experience in the private sector, in other words professional business managers who know how to live within their means. These managers should be appointed under specific contracts, and rewards should be given according to performance. Failure would result in end of contract. No more, no less. A professional manager, aware that the state would not bail him out if he failed, could be relied upon to take decisions with the long-term interest of the company in view, rather than short-term expediency or out of a desire to placate trade unions or please bosses back at the Secretariat. The government may well be planning to sell BTMC mills in the near future — that is what the Industrial Policy said anyway — but some streamlining and rationalisation are necessary if the units are to fetch their true worth in the privatisation market. The government must ensure no nationalised unit is sold at lower than its worth, because that too would represent wilful waste of public investment.

Tribute to Sher-e-Bangla

Once again a grateful nation paid tribute to the memories of Sher-e-Bangla A. K. Fazlul Huq on the occasion of his 118th birth anniversary. There are few other leaders of our nation who enjoy such universal respect, which he had earned through life-time of service to the poor and the down-trodden. Sher-e-Bangla's emergence in the political horizon of Bengal occurred at a time when politics was mainly a preoccupation of the educated and was confined among those who lived in the urban areas. Through his unquestioned commitment and relentless effort Sher-e-Bangla mobilized the peasantry of undivided Bengal and gave them confidence and strength to fight for their rights. His Krishak Praja Party touched the very soul of rural Bengal and within a very short time it became the biggest peasant organisation in the country and he, the unquestioned leader of the peasants. For the society at that time, mobilizing the peasantry was a virtual revolution. Exploited over the centuries and kept in subjugation through ignorance and lack of political power, the rural mass found in A. K. Fazlul Huq a fearless, sincere and committed advocate of their rights. It was his undaunted and courageous struggle on behalf of the peasants of Bengal that earned him the title of Sher-e-Bangla — the Tiger of Bengal.

As we pay tribute to him, we must learn from Fazlul Huq's life the many things he has to teach us, especially now when we are in the process of instituting democracy in Bangladsh. Fazlul Huq's life teaches us about the role of leadership in being able to motivate and lead the people towards social progress. In a society like ours, the leaders are expected to set examples of commitment, honesty and steadfastness in the face of adversity.

A leader has to be popular and yet, not a populist. He or she has to be with the masses and yet see miles ahead, much beyond the capacity and vision of a commonman. The leader has to be tough and uncompromising for the good of the nation, even if it should cost a bit of popularity in the short run. Most importantly a leader has to lead and not just move along with the masses.

It is this sort of leadership that the Sher-e-Bangla exemplifies and that is why he was able to enjoy the confidence of the masses throughout his life and grateful admiration of the generation that came after.

ONE of the few basic issues on which the three alliances were agreed last year about this time was that the television and the radio must enjoy some form of autonomy. A democratically elected government has since come into office. It has not been a smooth time for the new government, these past seven months. But for those who had expected the government to show its awareness of the obligation in respect of freeing the electronic media from its shackles, any excuse for delay is fast becoming a mere excuse, betraying an unwillingness to honour a pledge which the exigencies of the moment forced BNP leadership to give and about which it can now afford to have second thoughts.

The carefully worded, written speech of Mr. A.Q.M. Badruddoza Choudhury last Tuesday in the National Press Club auditorium would make one suspect as much. The meeting was arranged by Sammilita Sangsritik Jote that played an important role in the political movement last autumn. The Jote, after a period of extreme exertion, had earned some rest, which is not to say that it had gone to sleep. Tuesday evening its spokesman explained what had prompted it to organise the meeting. It had expected the government to move and the opposition parties in the Parliament to probe and to prod and in this the Jote was disappointed. As the first anniversary of the day of the joint declaration was approaching, the Jote leaders thought it wise to remind the reminder was meant for all, the three alliances, and particularly for the government. The organisers of the meeting, which was spread over two long evenings, had taken care

Autonomy for the Electronic Media

to see that all the three alliances are represented and represented meaningfully, by some senior leaders. They were successful in achieving this. It speaks well of the BNP government that it sent the Deputy Leader of the House, and one of the most pleasing personalities on the political stage, Dr. Choudhury, to attend the meeting and to speak.

Limit of Autonomy

It must be admitted that Dr. Choudhury spoke well, as was expected of him, and also that there was as much transparency in his speech as the actual position of his party would permit. Which is to say that there was a certain amount of hedging and riddling. Together with affirming that the government stood by the joint declaration, pledging autonomous status to Television and Radio, he raised the question of the need to articulate the idea of autonomy and to come to an agreement as regard the limits of autonomy. Quite plainly, taking Dr. Choudhury's words as correctly reflecting his government's mind, there was no disowning the common pledge but he viewed it as very much a matter of hard bargain as to how much could be safely conceded.

Both the tone and the content of the speech gave a good start to the proceedings of the meeting. The next Speaker, Mr. Abdus Samad Azad who is also the Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the House, while reminding the government of its commitment to the nation and its obligation to take the initiative in making necessary laws — for nothing less than a

law passed by the Parliament can give what is needed — was ready to respond to the suggestion that a hasty decision was to be eschewed, that careful deliberation must go before the idea of autonomy could be formulated. But, he made the emphatic comment, his party was unambiguously for autonomy of the electronic media. All coup leaders, he cautioned, have made the Radio and Television their first target because these two have served successive governments to the limit of their bents. Once freed from their captivity, they would be saved from the rapacity of all future violators of freedom.

Model, Scheme

Without minimising the complexity of the question of

PASSING CLOUDS

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

That, of course, was too optimistic a view. Speakers who came after him, if they didn't exactly make a chorus in favour of autonomy, had one thing in common. They were unhappy over the government's lukewarmness if not reluctance to implement what they considered to be as good as a decision. Some of the speakers did not take kindly to Prof. Choudhury's oblique reference to the universities. Look, what autonomy has made of our universities one of which — a pointed reference to Chittagong — has not been functioning for one full year, and all because of the autonomy it enjoys, autonomy which protects its Vice-Chancellor from the chastising hands of the Chancellor who is no less than the President of the country.

Also, it will not do to say that no concrete suggestions have yet been made regarding the changed status of our TV and Radio. Quite a detailed scheme, in the form of a set of proposals — I was given a

transforming the TV and the Radio from their present status to a state of self-government bodies, the speakers saw it as essentially a question of sincerity. Models and methods were there, if it were a question of how to do it. Distant models like the BBC it was not necessary to invoke. There was the All India Radio and the Doordarshan next door and our Radio, at least, has a common past with AIR. Look what they have made of it there, and what we have made of it here, — was the burden of some of the speakers.

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Famine Controversy Sends Disturbing Signals

By Sabir Mustafa

THE famine in North Bengal and government reaction to it have both come as rude reminders about the long and bumpy journey ahead till we get efficient administration on the one hand, and transparent and accountable government on the other. Representativeness alone is not adequate to ensure the type of government we need, that much is now understood.

We cannot have democracy, until we also establish transparency and accountability in the way government and administration are run in the country, and none of that is possible until the government shows a willingness to be frank and take the people into confidence.

In the past few days, government leaders including prime minister Khaleda Zia and law minister Mirza Golam Hafiz have not only denied the prevalence of a food crisis in the north, they have gone another step ahead (or back) and dismissed all reports of suffering as "political propaganda". According to ministers, such "want" as currently exists is pretty normal for the time of the year, which was made a little worse by the floods of late August and early September.

A disturbing negativism was palpable in the prime minister's comments in parliament last Wednesday, when Khaleda Zia pointed to the famine of 1974. What exactly was she trying to say? Quite simply that there was a famine in '74, but not now (because her government is well in control of the situation).

It is strange why the prime minister should choose to bring up '74. Does '74 justify what is happening today? It certainly does not. Perhaps Khaleda Zia regarded it as a useful way to attack her opponents. If so, then it was political behaviour of rather poor quality and taste. We have all learnt the lessons of '74, and the AL has paid dearly for it by bringing out of power for 17 years. The idea now is to prevent a repetition of '74, not to use it as a cheap political weapon.

By using '74 as a kind of

shield, and denying that her government had failed to take the measures necessary to prevent starvation and spread of cholera and diarrhoea (an ill-fed person is much more vulnerable to diarrhoeal diseases than an adequately-fed one), Khaleda Zia has foregone yet another chance to establish honesty and humility as characteristics of her administration.

Her failure to take the people into confidence about the situation also ran counter to general expectations of how a popularly-elected government should conduct its affairs.

The question now is, where does that leave the much-trumpeted accountability of the government? How can it be held accountable if it refuses to be frank and honest with the people? Democracy cannot only be about putting candidates up for elections every five years.

Over the past couple of months, the government has continued to claim that there is plenty of food in the warehouses and the markets — and therefore no food crisis, no famine. There is indeed plenty in the godowns, but the ministers' conclusion is either a misunderstanding of the situation, or a deliberate misrepresentation.

We know famine does not occur only when food disappears from the marketplace. With hundreds of thousands of families in the north suddenly losing purchasing power as a result of devastations wrought by the floods of August and September, and the collapse in labour wage rates (in some places to as low as three takas per day), relief — whether gratuitous or in exchange of work — became the only means of survival.

But an effective relief operation has been conspicuous by its absence. As a direct result,

starvation, consumption of accelerates malnutrition making people too weak to resist cholera and diarrhoea, have come to characterise the situation. That is famine, as much as 1974 was famine. The death toll this time will certainly be much lower, but that is a question of degree, not of principle.

In the administrative aspects of relief operations, government policy leaves much to be desired. Even though there are six elected members of parliament in

in the wake of the massive floods of 1987 and 1988; the country's borders with India are much more open now than they were 17 years ago, allowing smuggling of food stuff, like other goods, easier; health care facilities and the administrative machinery are now more closer to the grassroots as a result of the upazila system introduced in 1985; communication has improved greatly over the years, making it possible for people to move to where the food was (or vice-versa), much easier and quicker; and last but not least, the Western world, particularly the United States, is much more responsive to our food needs now than in '74, a fact demonstrated by the massive relief efforts mounted by the world during the floods of 1988 and after the cyclone earlier this year.

Naturally, things simply have to be better than then, even without the government doing anything. We must not lose sight of another point about this, and that is the Awami League government did not attempt to cover up his government's gigantic failure in '74 by pointing out how much worse things were in 1943 when hundreds of thousands starved to death.

It is no use for people like state minister Fazlur Rahman Pata to complain about lack of relief activity by the opposition. People pay their taxes to the government, not to the

Rangpur district, an outsider, Wing Commander Hamidullah Khan, was made relief coordinator for the district. Hamidullah has since coordinated his efforts with district officials and local units of his party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

This policy in a district where the BNP came a poor third in parliamentary polls, created grounds for irregularities, and lent credence to accusations of corruption and favouritism in the distribution of relief. Even non-government organisation (NGO) workers have complained of villagers being asked to declare support for the BNP before receiving whatever little relief there was.

Perhaps more serious is the manner in which elected representatives of the people were side-tracked in dealing with such an emergency. How are people of Rangpur supposed to hold their MPs accountable, if the latter are not given any authority or responsibility?

It is no use for people like state minister Fazlur Rahman Pata to complain about lack of relief activity by the opposition. People pay their taxes to the government, not to the

opposition. It is the government which wields the power and has the resources, and therefore must carry the responsibility. When a government enjoys and uses all the trappings of power without shouldering any responsibility, it is then that it becomes an autocratic one.

A minister pointing the finger at any direction other than his own chest smacks strongly of an effort to shirk responsibility (Americans call it passing the buck, but in Washington the buck always stops at the White House). State minister Pata must realise that it is food minister

But, with the issue now thrown open by the courageous reporting by a section of the press, and strong but belated opposition pressure, relief efforts should come under the spotlight (although not to the same degree as after the April cyclone, when over 100 foreign journalists and TV crews kept a watch on relief operations which were later handed over to foreign military personnel). With any luck, the result may improve things enough to prevent any further starvation or spread of disease.

Shamsul Islam and relief minister Lutfar Rahman Khan who have access to tens of thousands of tonnes of rice and wheat in the warehouses, not anybody else.

Had the government appointed local MPs to be responsible for relief operations, or at least asked them to join

OPINION

Rohingya Extermination Campaign

Saruddinibill village were stabbed by Magh rogues while their money and valuables were looted.

The situation in Buthidaung area is more critical. Saleh Ahmed and Ali Ahmed, from Jabbarpara of Buthidaung township and Abu Sayed, Kalu, and Abu of Kagyapa village were beaten to death by Burmese Army last month. When the incident was reported to the concerned Army Headquarters of Buthidaung, the officer in charge shouted that "it is nothing wrong to kill you Kalas (foreigners)." In another incident Imam Sharif and Habban who hail from Lawadaung Bazanchaung village while coming out of mosque after prayer, two army personnel belonging to the nearby army cantonment stabbed and injured them seriously without any provocation. The SLORC authorities concerned of the region have virtually given a free hand to indulge in these kinds of heinous crimes against innocent Rohingyas.

Meanwhile more Muslim refugees are crossing daily into Bangladesh braving difficult weather and jungle terrain to save themselves from Army repression and harassment of Magh scoundrels. The Rohingya Solidarity Organisation would like to request and draw the attention of the democratically elected government of Bangladesh towards the plight of these unfortunate Muslim brethren of Arakan and take all possible steps on humanitarian grounds to mitigate their sufferings.

Dr. Mohammed Yunus
President, Rohingya Solidarity Organisation
Arakan, Burma

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Employment

It is true that frustration among the educated youths is increasing to the horror of the entire nation. Every year a great number of pass-outs look forward for jobs, the chances of which are too scanty, obviously. As a result, even suicidal cases are on the increase among literate juveniles that we know scanning the pages of national dailies.

There are instances of high-ranking candidates moving from door to door in search of jobs. They return disappointed as there exists only 'no vacancy' at the employers' premise. In some cases, suitable candidates are denied job offers for want of 'good contact'. This is the real situation.

Now, in the wake of transition to the democratic system, a particular 'strategy' should be evolved to generate more employment opportunities. I think the most viable way of creating job opportunities is industrialisation. During the autocratic Ershad regime, some thing about an Investors' Forum encouraging joint-venture investment was heard but most of the foreign entrepreneurs didn't find a favourable climate in the absence of a stable political order or democratic system.

Now that such statement is no longer in existence, the government should resort to immediate steps to create a congenial joint investment climate to rebuild the shattered economy as well as to improve the employment situation.

Md. Atiqul Karim
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Children and Flowers

Sir, Taking into consideration the children workers of the streets earning 'two pice' and a living through selling flowers and garlands, we find their status definitely better and respectable than: a) shoe shine boys on the street, b) porters, c) servants, d) tokais (waste pickers), e) beggars and f) in some other disreputable professions.

Our society, social welfare department, International agencies, NGOs, people in

legal profession and the public in general all have a moral and sacred duty-cum-responsibility towards our children whether within our home or outside in the street. For the children are our next generation.

The children are direct descendants from nature and love. By forcibly separating them from nature's gift such as flowers and garlands, we are only diverting them again from good to bad — towards the same monotonous, shameful and discarded life of the slums where the fragrance and beauty of flowers nor the environment exist, but the frustration and hunger prevail. I congratulate Salma Sobhan and Raushan Jahan Parveen, of Ain O Salish for their most touchy and commendable expressions under caption 'Cruelty to Children' published in the news papers recently.

Anowar Ul Mohsin
Jigatola, Dhaka

printed copy of it at the meeting — was prepared by the media men and these were available to the ministry concerned.

I will have no comments