

End this JS Deadlock

The on-and-off talks between the ruling party and the opposition aimed at bringing the latter back to the session of the Jatiya Sangsad seem to have reached a deadlock. The Awami League (AL) and its principal partner, the Five-Party Alliance had been pressing the Government of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) for the acceptance of four principal demands since they walked out of the last session. These demands relate to the trial of Golam Azam, the withdrawal of the cases filed against the organisers of the Gono Adalat staged against Azam, the Indemnity (Repeal) Bill and due honour to be shown to the Leader of the Opposition, Sheikh Hasina.

In initiating these talks, both sides had offered the hope that by reaching a consensus on these issues, they would spare the country, not to mention the parliament, both divisiveness and acrimony, thus reducing the need for more street demonstrations, processions and perhaps even hartals staged by the opposition. We had welcomed these talks in the belief that some accommodation worked out by the two sides would defuse the tension in the country and pave the way for a lively and substantive discussion on the national budget during the current session of the parliament.

In this respect, our hopes so far have been dashed. While AL sources complain that the leadership of BNP had never been sincere in resolving the deadlock, Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia had been telling public rallies that AL had "betrayed" its electorate by staying away from the current budget session, thus making some political capital out of the current deadlock.

For the future of parliamentary democracy in the country, this is an untenable situation. The whole purpose of having a popularly elected Sangsad is to have a forum for orderly, constructive and all-party deliberation on all national issues. In the process, agreements would be reached on some, while on others, the verdict of the majority would prevail. This is one aspect that reflects the supremacy of the Jatiya Sangsad, making it different from what is often called the parliament of the street.

We believe, in view of the urgency of the situation, especially relating to the discussion on the national budget, the two sides should make a renewed move to end the deadlock to enable the opposition to take its rightful place in the parliament. What if this renewed move, if at all made, fails to yield a solution? Does it mean that the present crucial budget session should continue and eventually end without the participation of the opposition?

Here, it is the opposition that must review its options and reassess its strategy. It is perfectly within its power — and wisdom — to take an unilateral decision by returning to the Sangsad session, making it clear to the country that while it condemns the refusal of the ruling party to reach any accommodation on the four pending issues, it ends its boycott for the sake of the millions of people who want their problems and grievances, in economic, social and political fields, discussed on the floor of the house, during the budget session. Will the opposition lose face by making this move? We would answer it with a resounding "No", because, through this move, the opposition will earn a tremendous respect from a cross section of our people, including journalists who would like the disgraceful incident of last Sunday to be discussed again in the parliament, especially when the authorities release the report of the Judicial Committee set up for this purpose. On this and other issues, the opposition cannot abdicate its responsibility or the mandate it enjoys from the people.

Children in Peril

A photograph, transmitted by Agence France Presse (AFP) and published in several Dhaka newspapers yesterday, has once again brought to the limelight a particular danger facing children of this country. The photograph showed a couple of Indian policemen carrying some Bangladeshi children whom they had rescued from a gang of child-smugglers at New Delhi airport. The smugglers had intended to ship the boys to Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. It is known that these stolen children are used in camel races, because their cries apparently make the beasts run faster (to the delight of the crowd, no doubt). But what remains unknown is their fate after their usefulness for camel races — a favourite spectator sport in Gulf states — is over.

There is no dearth of horror stories regarding what happens to boys sold to Gulf customers by gangs operating in Bangladesh with a chain of links through India and Pakistan.

What alarms most people here is the ease with which the boys are abducted and then smuggled out across the border, which is supposedly tightly-patrolled by the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR). While we have legitimate reasons to doubt the efficiency of the BDR in stopping illegal cross-border trade, the lapse in vigilance when it comes to human trafficking is really not comprehensible, let alone excusable. Another point to ponder is the role of the border guards on the Indian side, and the extent of cross-border cooperation between the two. Judging by the ease with which these gangs operate across the borders of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, it is highly doubtful that security measures are anything like adequate.

The situation naturally calls for a thorough investigation into the whole affair. But because of the multi-national character of the criminals' activities, the probe must be a closely-coordinated one among the three countries of the sub-continent directly affected by the trade. Since Bangladesh is the principal source of boys to be smuggled, the responsibility of our police and BDR are even greater than those of our neighbours. The government should not only ask, but must insist, that Indian and Pakistani internal security agencies supply all the information and assistance necessary to smash the network of the child smugglers. Last, but hardly least, our government should tell the Gulf Arab states that unless they crack down on the practice of using abducted children in "games" in their countries, then their relations with Bangladesh may well suffer. We cannot accept our children being used as slaves for fun and games to satisfy the perverted taste of somebody else, just as we would not tolerate the practice of slavery of any kind in this country.

BACK IN 1975, population was declared by the Government as the Number One national problem. During the last sixteen years, successive governments have translated the policy declaration into a priority programme of population control and family planning. In November 1975, when I took over as the Secretary to Ministry of Family Planning, only 7% of the fertile couples were practising family planning and the population growth rate was 3.2%. In 16 years Bangladesh has made some significant progress by increasing the contraceptive prevalence rate (CPR) from 7% to 35% and the population growth rate declined from 3.2% to 2.17%. The total family size (TFS) has also declined from 7 to 4.5.

These achievements sound good as compared to the neighbouring countries of Pakistan, Nepal and Myanmar and the Northern Indian States of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. However, despite the lower rate of growth the large base of population of 75 million in 1971 has now increased to 115 million, an addition of 40 million in 20 years. About 2.5 million is being added annually.

In spite of the generous external aid of about \$22 billion that Bangladesh has received since 1972, economic growth remains low, on the average, 0.4% annually. Bangladesh continues to remain a poor country, at the bottom of most comparative indices such as the human development index, education, women's status, per capita income. Due to the pressure of exploding population, the ecological support system is breaking down and the environmental protection is giving way to recurring cyclones, floods, droughts, tidal waves and other calamities. These are indications of the desperate struggle of poor people moving to marginal land such as offshore islands, river banks, low lying areas and getting overwhelmed.

Bangladesh is almost in the population trap of high population growth and low level of economic development (Prof Maurice King). To come out of the desperate situation, radical, bold and strategic interventions in the family planning

THE CHALLENGE OF DEMOCRACY

Population Control Remains Top Priority for Bangladesh

by Dr Mohammed A Sattar

Bangladesh faces the challenge of institutionalising democracy after fifteen years of recurrent military and autocratic rule. In this struggle, population control and human resources development are two important factors for moving the country towards sustained economic development and political stability.

programme must be pursued more vigorously by the present democratic regime. Some of the possible strategic interventions are:

Strong political support must continue in terms of programme priority and resource allocation. By a national consensus family planning programme must be kept above political controversy so that resources are not wasted unnecessarily and social mobilization for the programme progress unimpeded.

It must be understood that there is a large bottom up unmet demand for family planning from the 30% poorest of the poor for sheer survival of themselves and their living children. A number of pilot projects, such as ICDDR,B (Matlab/Sirajgonj), GTZ (Munshiganj), BRAC (Manikganj) and BACE (Panchagram) show that even in low level of socio-economic development in rural Bangladesh up to 50% CPR can be achieved with good quality family planning services.

Areas of direct interventions which have shown good results must be sustained, such as, women's education and employment, menstrual regulation (MR) on demand, raising age of marriage and encouragement of breastfeeding and natural family planning.

Strong support for women's education, training, employment and higher status in society must be sustained. With Begum Khaleda Zia as the Prime Minister there should be more enthusiastic support for women's development, employment and higher status.

Raising ages of marriage for

females from present 16 years to at least 18-20 years and for males from present 18 to 21-23 years has to be considered as an imperative.

At present an estimated 17% pregnancies end in abortion. Government's support for menstrual regulation (MR) must be continued more widely in the rural clinics and effort should be made to liberalize abortion law at least to the level of the neighbouring countries of India and Sri Lanka.

An understanding of the donors and right-to-life groups is needed for provision of better and easily accessible family planning services to poor and rural people so that desperate demand for abortion is reduced.

Breast feeding and traditional family planning methods should be encouraged even if the methods are considered relatively unsafe. The religious groups no longer oppose family planning, although they may differ on methods. Efforts should be made as is being done in Indonesia, to win positive support of religious institutions for family life education and child spacing.

A strong political will should be able to induce an integrated health/family planning service delivery system to work efficiently. Constant bickering and conflicts between these two departments waste most scarce of human and physical resources.

With donor and government support NGOs have played an important role in providing primary health care and family planning services and mobilizing strong community support

to family planning. This move should be encouraged more vigorously.

Human Resources Development

NARROWER CONCEPT OF HRD: The narrower concept of human resources development refers to the HRD for the population programme itself. With generous assistance from donor agencies such as the World Bank, USAID, ODA (UK), etc. Population Programme in Bangladesh has developed a series of 32 training institutes for its 40,000 paramedical and field workers under the umbrella of the National Institute of Population Research and Training (NIPORT). The programme has well-trained and capable clinical and managerial professionals. Similarly the NGOs have their own training facilities supported by donor agencies.

BROADER CONCEPT OF HRD: Human development under a dynamic state of economic growth meets the ever increasing demand for basic needs of education, health, training, employment, income and freedom of choice. Adequate income earning opportunities and public spending on human priority needs are essential for human development. The UN Human Development Index (HDI) 1991 shows Bangladesh ranking at 136 (out of 160 countries) with life expectancy at 52 years, literacy at 32.2%. The HDI index 0.186 (out of 1.00) for Bangladesh, is just above Nepal, Bhutan and Afghanistan.

Population control and human resources development are closely related. In Bangladesh, population pressure on scarce development opportunities and social services will continue to limit policy options when an estimated 80% of the population live below the poverty line and 50% of the rural population are landless, public sector will have to play the crucial role in human development. The new democratic regime has taken some initiative and continued to support the on-going (HRD) programmes.

Some of these are:

Primary education is a basic human right. The government has declared primary education as compulsory. BRAC and BACE provide cost-effective models of primary education.

To encourage female education school fees have been made free for girls up to class VIII. BACE stipend programme shows that one pound a month stipend can keep a girl at the secondary school.

To encourage adult literacy and informal vocational training for rural unemployed, community education system has been introduced.

To empower the poor rural and disadvantaged groups "Gram Sarkar" system has been reintroduced.

To channel credit to the poor, particularly for women the Grameen Bank activities are being supported.

Employment of women has been encouraged systematically — 15% of the government jobs, 50% of primary school teachers have been reserved for women. In the private sector garments industry is now employing about 250,000

women. These have far reaching impact on social mobilization, providing jobs outside homes and strengthening women's status.

The Government is encouraging manpower export. Thousands of educated young people are on the move seeking opportunities abroad for work and income. They need to be supported with training in language and skills.

The political base for human development has definitely improved under the democratic regime. But in a stagnant economy, resources must be mobilized both internally by economising on resource utilization and externally by a better use of funds. The pledging of \$2.3 billion in the April 1991 consortium meeting is an indication of continued support to Bangladesh by donor agencies.

The internal resources must be utilized more efficiently. The UN Human Development Report 1991, shows that Bangladesh spends 1.2% of GNP for health and education and 1.5% for military expenditure. It suggests a freezing of military expenditure, reduction of subsidy on public enterprise and hard measures on eliminating corruption in public offices, thus releasing resources for human development. This will in turn facilitate sustained economic growth.

People are ready to act and build up the country and reap the fruits of freedom. Transition to democracy has freed the spirit of man and raised hopes, the leadership must not fall again. Bold leadership and decisions are needed in the area of population and human resources development.

The writer, a distinguished economic expert who served as the head of the International Committee for Population Management (ICOMP) in the last years of his career, passed away in Islamabad last month during an official visit to Pakistan. The article here, published for the first time, has been made available to this paper by the writer's wife, Dr Ellen Sattar. It is based on a talk given by the writer at the South Asian Studies Centre, London University last February.

Brutal Murders Increase Calls for Death Penalty

Derek Round writes from Wellington

Despite concern at the growth of violence, New Zealand is probably a lot safer than most Western countries. And despite public revulsion at recent murders, the chances of the death penalty being brought back are very remote

Prime Minister Bolger says criminal violence is a bigger problem than the economy.

Some callers on radio talk-back shows are demanding compulsory castration of sex criminals. An organisation called Mothers Against Sex Crimes is calling for the death penalty "because nothing else is working".

A 1987 government-appointed committee of inquiry into violence has recommended automatic imprisonment for violent offending; removing as a defence the mitigating effects of alcohol; no parole for at least 10 years for life sentences; reducing television violence; and closing bars between 2 pm and 4 pm.

The recommendations have not been implemented although sentences for crimes such as rape have been increased.

Peter Williams, a leading criminal lawyer who heads the Howard League for Penal Reform, says the solution is to work on root causes in the community. He is critical of the lack of counselling and psychiatric services for the mentally ill.

People should be encouraged to report suspicious "loner type" behaviour to the police or social welfare officers so potentially dangerous people can get counselling, Mr

Williams says.

Another leading criminal lawyer, Mike Bungay, who has defended many murderers, says: "If you want to have a non-violent society you've got to have a caring society, and we're not the sort of caring society we used to be."

The current spate of violence has variously been put down to unemployment, drugs, pornography, television violence, alcohol and a breakdown in social values.

Prime Minister Bolger says there is no connection between rising unemployment — now around 10 per cent — and violence, although Police Minister John Banks sees a link.

Mental health Foundation Director Dr Barbara Disley believes unemployment and massive social change in the last few years including welfare state restructuring are factors in the increase in violent crime.

While calls for the reintroduction of the death penalty satisfy the public's desire for revenge when a murder occurs, they do nothing to address underlying causes of violent offences, Dr Disley says.

But despite concern at the growth of violence and the rising number of homicides, Dr John Pratt, senior lecturer in criminology at Wellington's Victoria University, argues that New Zealand is probably a lot

safer and more secure than most other Western countries.

An international crime survey in 1988 showed there were 8.4 murders and attempted murders per 100,000 people in the United States and 5.5 per 100,000 in Canada. In New Zealand the figure was 3.1 murders and attempted murders per 100,000 people.

In contrast to this, there were 5.1 murders and attempted murders per 100,000 New Zealanders in 1993.

The long-term trends in this country and elsewhere suggest a significant decline in violence and the public's tolerance of it," Dr Pratt says.

New Zealand first had the death penalty in 1840 under the British colonial law and 44 people have been hanged since then, all but one (a young Maori warrior executed for treason in 1869) for murder. Only one of those hanged was a woman, a baby murderer.

The country's first Labour Government, elected in 1935, immediately began commuting all death sentences to prison terms and abolished hanging in 1941.

The conservative National Party reintroduced the death penalty in 1950 and eight people were hanged in what was grimly called the "Swinging 50s."

ment by opponents of the death penalty.

But Mr Laws, the National Party MP, is now planning to introduce a private member's bill in Parliament seeking a national referendum on the issue at the same time as next year's general election.

This would provide time for public debate, "a reflection on the ghastly crimes of recent months" and an opportunity for all sides to make their views known," he says.

But, despite public revulsion at recent murders, the chances of the death penalty being brought back are very remote.

—Depthnews Asia

OPINION

Export on Trial

Shahabuddin Mahtab

The first editorial of a local vernacular daily (dt. Sunday 7th June), was titled "Frozen fish now dumped under earth". The first reaction of a reader, would be, what a ridiculous statement. The shrimps are a rare delicacy and it should adorn the dining table, on very rare occasions, say, when a son-in-law comes to visit his wife's parents. If Alexander the Great was alive to-day, he would have said once more, "what a strange country is this, Shuklas!" A long time ago (in the year 1975) a great American, late Dr. Winburn Thomas, who came to Bangladesh to serve a humanitarian cause, told me two things, "you waste your resources in such a way that even the richest country in the world would simply shudder at it"; the second thing that this great humanitarian told me was "you only do ten paisa worth of work, and ninety paisa worth of propaganda/public relations". Dr. Thomas is now eternally resting in the soils of Bangladesh. These facts were stated just to highlight, what a single person can do.

Messrs Cormondal Fisheries Development Ltd of Sathkira, with the intention of earning a very high profit, saved on the cost of cold storage. And as a result, Tk 3 crore worth of frozen shrimps were found to be rotten and unfit for human consumption, when these reached their destination. The shrimps are now being buried in the soils of Bangladesh, as has been stated above.

The exporter has not lost a single Taka, as all the money was provided by the Sonali Bank, Sathkira branch, and in further consequences, the people will be the sufferers, and there will be more poverty.

But the more fearful thing in this case is its grave implications that will be reflected in

the importing countries. It will, by no means, be confined to the shrimp industry but implicate all Bangladesh exports. One further thing has to be mentioned here. The registration of Messrs Cormondal Fisheries Development Corporation was cancelled by the Ministry of Commerce as far back as 1987. The bank, however, continued to extend loans to the company. The recoverable loan in this case, inclusive of interest, is now Taka six crore. We are now talking that, there is no production in the country, there is unemployment, the wheels of the economy have come to a standstill position, and the country is in a recession, and we have an uncontrollable inflation (for should we say stagflation).

On another side of the picture we see that while the country is able to produce 180 crore metres of cloth against its requirement of 144 crore metres, most of our weavers are unemployed. Textile mills are unable to sell their huge stockpiles. While we should have been self sufficient in milk, by observing a national strategy, we are importing milk powder worth Tk 400 crore or more. The cloth sector and the milk sector can provide employment to a huge number of people. There are clearly many other sectors which can provide employment to our people, and at the same time meet the many needs.

Admitted that we have a burgeoning population, admitted also that we are a disaster prone area, but we have a hardworking and resilient people, who have been battered and broken many times, but have again risen on their feet. The government must lead us in the right direction and take all actions that are in the national interests.

N M
Rajshahi University.

To the Editor...

Newspaper holidays

Sir, Newspapers in our country regularly close their offices during all public holidays and we go without newspapers for days at times, specially during the Eid celebrations. Though we take it for granted and never say a word, we never like it. Is it true that no news is ever made during the holidays or do we lose appetite for news on these days?

Let us imagine what would happen if the hospitals were closed down during holidays! If the fire service, the WASA, the DESA, the Titas Gas, Radio and TV — all went to sleep on holidays! It must be remembered that newspapers are doing an essential service. Absence of newspapers is disturbing and should be regarded as such. Short of a catastrophe nothing should stop the newspapers from seeing the light of the day. I know many excuses will be put forward life, the newspaper staff members also need holidays. So is the case with the staff of hospitals, fire service and all others mentioned

above. How do they keep their services going during holidays?

It needs a little more attention to the reasons for which the newspapers exist and a little more respect for the public whom they serve. With some organisational and administrative adjustments here and there, most newspapers, if not all, should be able to maintain an unbroken schedule. Let us hope they do it.

Shahjahan Haft
DOIS, Mohakhali, Dhaka

An appeal for peace

Sir, We are always digging our aberrations of tumultuous happenings preceding the movement which led to the very inception of independent and sovereign Bangladesh.

Instead of infusing new awakening and zeal to build the nascent republic into an abode of peace, we are creating disharmony and discord to divide the nation into fragments and factions reviving the old rivalry virtually with vigour and enthusiasm rather to nullify the sacrifices of

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who buried the discord by declaring general amnesty for all and sundry provided they declare their allegiance to Bangladesh.

We should heal the wounds not revive them.

S M Khalid Chowdhury
Dhanmondi, Dhaka.

Sword of authority

Sir, And now bandying words with a minister runs a great risk. If a subordinate does it, he gets fired or at least transferred elsewhere. Kamal Lohani's removal from Shilpa Kala Academy is just a pointer to the state of affairs on our top level. This also betrays the real attitude of the custodians of the democratic values. Don't they realise that democracy is not merely a form of government as defined by Abraham Lincoln, but it is also an outlook on life and a pattern of behaviour which a leader should preach and practice? A minister who claims to be a champion of democracy must have respect for the opinion of