

Police Need to be Serious

Toll collection has long been a problem in the country. But in recent years a more daring and monstrous dimension has been added to this illegal practice. As the toll collectors become more desperate, they do not hesitate to use their lethal weapons in getting away with their booties. This new version of toll collection is reported to have kept wide areas of the country in constant fear. The method used by toll collectors is despicable and at times gruesome. Children are taken hostage to extort ransom. Organised gangs have been making the most of a lax law and order situation.

Known as *Chockh Bandha Party* (gang blind-folding its victims), the group has been operating in Savar, Dhamrai and Mirzapur and Nagarpur of Tangail for the past 15 years. Recently some such gangs have extended their operation to Manikganj. The abduction of a boy — a student of class VI — and the subsequent freeing of him by the police after long 11 days from the den of the culprits have created panic in the area. But the gangs have the bizarre record of abducting about 500 people and killing at least 20 of them during the past 15 years. So it is a reign of terror they have established in the areas of their operation.

The good news is that four members of the fearsome gang have been arrested and about 5,000 to 6,000 people of the area went to Satoria thana in procession with the demand for arresting the rest of the gangsters. Given the records of the culprits, one cannot rest assured of the success of the police in nabbing all the members of the gang. It calls for concerted efforts of the law enforcing agency and the public. But the police will have to take the lead. They surely need to prove their credentials to the public. An officer in charge of a thana where people are also receiving uninitialised letters asking for huge amounts of money — non-compliance with which is threatened with the abduction of their wards — has dismissed the threat as a joke.

Will the police officer wait till something happens on the scale of Manikganj in his area to wake up to the menace? The fact that the law enforcing agency has neglected forewarnings most of the time instead of acting with alacrity explains why such crimes have proliferated in the recent past. The common people cannot face up to the criminal gangs because the latter wield firearms of the sophisticated variety. Even the weapons of the police are obsolete compared with theirs. But the real strength lies in the legal authority that the law enforcing agency has. The police must outsmart the gangs by intelligence and public support. Unfortunately, whatever little training, and the backing of the state and the people they have go in vain because of their lack of pro-people motivation.

Now that the child-lifters in Manikganj have been arrested on the basis of secret information, we can naturally expect a prompt action both in the exercise of their power to apprehend other members of the gang and in ensuring vigilance against similar criminal acts. Taking hostage of 500 people and killing 20 of them are serious crimes. The genesis of the crime now can be uncovered bit by bit and a proper trial of the criminals can have a deterring effect on those waiting in the wings to commit similar crimes. We will be eagerly waiting for the follow-up of this case, because the police there have really got an opportunity to put record straight.

Lurking Fear

Night travel by long-haul express buses, popularly called coach, are on a steep rise. People going far to attend business or to report for duty prefer not to spoil the day in journey. The pattern has already been well-set — local and slow buses, slow because they serve every wayside stop, ply during the day and long and almost non-stop trips are made by night coaches. Although day buses still dominate the interdistrict services, demand for the night coaches keeps on mounting all the time.

When roads and waterways have been opened and put to use in a fast growing manner with generous investment in both the public and the private sectors, the big gain stands to be offset by one small thing. Security of the roads is in a poor and unpredictable shape and is dwindling with every passing day. The police, or the government, and the transport operators have between them arranged things in a manner that would not help make the roads accident-free this side of the millennium. That is a problem plaguing us every day of the year and every journey of the thousands that are made each day.

To this now adds the problem of night transports falling a prey to gangs of dacoits. A Daily Star report from Jhenidah, published yesterday, gives a picture of utter road insecurity with at least five dacoities committed in the Jessore-Khulna region in only one month — August. The pattern of the attacks is the same. Nothing has apparently been done to arrest this dangerous development. We have a hunch that at no competent level the problem has yet been noted seriously. The police proceed only after a crime has been committed and that too they do with utmost reluctance resulting in no punishment for anyone — ever. Who or which is the authority charged with making the roads safe from robbery? There must be some, somewhere? Hasn't it been seized of the problem? Then why is it there for?

The nation's greatest highway possibly is the Dhaka-Chittagong road which can deservingly be called one of the lifelines of our economy. The road, made and maintained at an enormous cost, can now be negotiated in five hours. This speaks of a very good response from the transport business without whose improvement of service, efficiency and facilities this wouldn't have been possible. And then one night last week a luxury bus is waylaid at gunpoint. The passengers are robbed of all their moveable possessions. And the raiders take away also an unprecedented and inconceivable booty — a woman passenger. The whole billion-Taka Dhaka-Chittagong Road exercise is robbed of all meaning in a moment.

Unless something is done to improve the security of interdistrict night travel things would go beyond easy recovery. It is the government's job, almost exclusively, to secure national highways against such crimes. A very serious test of governance is waiting here for the present regime.

Selling Fruits and Vegetables, Spices and Flowers, Abroad

THE news media gave fairly wide coverage earlier this month to the findings of a study on prospects of export of agricultural products, sponsored by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). The study is said to have identified fruits, vegetables, cut-flowers, spices and rice as the key areas in agriculture for diversification of the production base and export growth.

Rice has of course always topped the list of priorities in agriculture. The item has now made the export list also. The performance of the other key items had been just dismal. For instance, the JICA study notes that export of fruits and vegetables dropped from \$17.9 million in 1987 to \$3.3 million in 1992. In 1987, fruits and vegetables accounted for roughly 1.5 per cent of total exports. Total exports have grown by more than 60 per cent over the five-year period. So, the share of fruits and vegetables has shrunk to only a tiny fraction of one percentage point of total exports in 1992. It's not that there was anything to brag about then. However, it has gone worse since.

Truth is, total output of fruits, vegetables and spices has not grown sufficiently to generate a surplus for export after meeting domestic needs in full. To be sure, total output growth of a particular product group is not necessarily an essential prerequisite for yielding export surplus for a specific item. Output of selected items in a given product group could be significantly expanded solely for the purpose of export. Overall output would not necessarily grow in that situation to a level which outstrips domestic requirements.

Besides, there are many other factors which are relevant for establishing export markets for agricultural products. Cost of the output, storage and preservation facilities, packaging and transportation, market research and promotion — all such matters come into play in determining export potentials of agricultural products. Yet, after all is said and done, a solid production base remains the crucial factor in promoting a sustained growth of export of agricultural products.

Officials statistics reveal that per capita availability of domestically grown fruits, vegetables in the country has actually declined during the twenty-year period from 1972-73 to 1991-92. Total population, according to 1974 census, was 71.4 million. The 1991 census puts the total population at 111.4 million. Population has thus grown by 40 million or, by 56 per cent. Total production of fruits in the country in 1972-73 came to 15.07 lakh tonnes. In 1991-92, total production was 15.28 lakh tonnes. The growth of output over this period works out at 1.37 per cent. The per capita availability has thus dropped sharply. Vegetables did somewhat better and total output grew by nearly 35 per cent over the 20-year period. All the same, given the population growth of 56 per cent, per capita availability declined anyway. Spices put up a really poor show. Total output actually fell from 3.28 lakh tonnes in 1972-73 to 3.22 lakh tonnes in 1991-92.

Performance of individual items in the product groups varied of course. Among fruits, production of mango — an export item for other countries in the sub-continent — plunged by as much as 46 per cent in our case. Output of

litchies, another item with export potential, fell by 7 per cent over the 20-year period. On the other hand, pineapple yield increased by 51 per cent, nearly catching up with population growth. It also seems that pineapple juice and preserves are exported, off and on. Export values, however, are paltry. For instance, such exports fetched only about a million taka each year in 1988-89 and 1989-90. Banana is perhaps the most widely traded fruit on the global market place. Our banana output grew by only about 7 per cent over the twenty-year period, marking a rather sharp fall in

Well, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) says that having attained autonomy in production, Bangladesh is expected to be among the top 10 rice exporting countries by the year 2000. Rich now, however, even rice self-sufficiency does not exactly look like a surefire proposition. Rich output had slipped by 1.58 per cent in 1993-94, to 18.05 million tonnes from 18.34 million tonnes in 1992-93. Latest official utterances suggest that rice production this year may fall by as much as 9 per cent. This year's setback in rice output can largely be blamed on

the weather. Last year's production slippage, however, was attributed by some experts also to lower acreage and yield rate caused by shift to high-valued and low yielding varieties. To be sure, progress is being made in expanding irrigation facility for agricultural production. It is said that 35 per cent of the country's arable land has been brought under irrigation this year as against 25 per cent in 1991. Still, it is the weather which has the last word in determining the level of rice output. If the weather does not behave benignly the next season, then the fall in output three years in a row would upset the programme for rice self-sufficiency. Consequently, hopes for developing rice as a major agricultural export item would recede into the future.

The renewed uncertainty about the level of rice production holds implications for the crop diversification programme. For one thing, crop diversification cannot be promoted at the expense of rice production. Any policy which could stunt the growth of rice output would have to be avoided. Land would remain a limiting factor. Better growing techniques have to be adopted to raise output and productivity. The price signal vis-a-vis the cost of input has to be right. Improvements in the handling, processing and storage of primary produce, as well as more efficient marketing methods, could yield substantial positive results both for crop diversification and expansion of rice output. It needs to be noted that our yield of 2756 kg paddy per hectare is considerably below the world average of 3516 kg and way behind the star performers in Asia like South Korea with 6092 kg and China with 5572 kg.

Talking of technological advances in agricultural production, it seems one needs to go no farther than Singapore to see high-tech farming at work. In a recent write-up for the International Herald Tribune, Mr Andrew Ranard gives, *inter alia*, an account of the hydroponic vegetable farms in Singapore. As he notes, land is too precious in Singapore to go for traditional agriculture. To quote, "Hydroponics is soil-less, dirt-free agriculture. And dirt-free in Singapore's hydroponic 'net-houses' — they are covered with nets to keep out insects and to allow the tropical heat to dissipate (as opposed to greenhouses, which retain heat) — also means pesticide-free. In the net-houses, the plants sit in troughs lined with plastic sheets, with their roots extending through styrofoam into small sponges that

lie in nutrient-rich water." Hydroponics require more manpower, says Mr Ranard, and the yield is claimed to be 1.5 to 2.5 times that of soil farming because when plants are harvested, a new crop can be planted almost immediately. And the produce is pesticide-free. Mr Ranard considers the technology futuristic for Southeast Asia. To us, it surely is!

A crop diversification programme which also seeks to promote farm exports, has to take into account the market access package offered by the Uruguay Round global trade accord. The pact contains possibilities for deepest tariff cuts by the industrialized nations for some of the tropical products. Future programmes for agricultural product development, designed to yield export surplus, should be specifically geared towards promoting output in those sectors which offer better prospects for entry into global trade flows.

As noted at the outset, the JICA study identifies cut-flowers, including orchids, as one of the items having export potential. I have skirted the issue thus far because of lack of data on production and marketing of flowers. One thing seems certain. We are not producing hydroponic orchids as Singapore does.

Lots of flower shops have sprung up in the city lately. Does this indicate that flowers are being grown on a commercial scale? As for selling abroad, it seems that export of artificial flowers fetched nearly 32 million taka in 1993-94. True, artificial flowers are not flowers really. So what? In the end, it all boils down to earning some more money.

"convergence" (a favourite word in US briefings) is at the mercy of domestic politics; that US Republican members of Congress are liable to obstruct whatever promises Clinton a foreign policy success, just as opposition groups in Russian Parliament are certain to resist whatever looks like a success for Yeltsin, or can be seen as sell-out to foreign interests.

This is particularly the case over former Yugoslavia, where the task will be to deflect Clinton from his October 15 deadline for lifting the Bosnian arms embargo if the Bosnian Serbs still reject the "contact group" partition plan.

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ALONG MY WAY

S B Chaudhuri

Likewise, production of vegetables shows a varied pattern. For instance, potato output grew by 82 per cent over the period of 1972-73 to 1991-92, recording an improvement in per capita availability. Production of sweet potato, on the other hand, declined by 32 per cent. In any case, export of fruits and vegetables is reported to have looked up a bit in 1993-94 and reached \$8 million. Even then, it's only 0.3 per cent of the total exports that year. In the spices group, major items in which output has declined are chillies, onion and garlic. These are items that we import now. Spices contribute very little, if at all, to export earnings. Gone are the days when spices like chillies used to figure on the export list fairly prominently.

What about rice for export?

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Security Dominates as Yeltsin Goes to Washington

Andrew Wilson writes from Moscow

Security and economic issues are expected to top the agenda of the summit between Boris Yeltsin and Bill Clinton in Washington (Sept 27-28). Gemini News Service reports on an unexpected easing of US-Russia relations in advance of the meeting.

Bill helps Boris



that Washington not only failed to recognise Russia as a great power but could also not decide if its interests were better served by having Russia weak and divided or strong and a real partner.

This also entailed an incoherent policy towards other former Soviet republics. Russians were affronted when the US seemed ready, as in communist times, to favour "questionable" neighbour whose intrusion into ex-Soviet space promised to curtail Moscow's influence.

The tendency was most evident in Central Asia, where Washington seemed to back or condone penetration by Turkey, Pakistan and even Iran. As a result, many Russians thought that they had been wrong to be so trust-

ing. The biggest disappointment has been over Western economic aid. Not only have the promised sums been slow to reach the economic drip-feed, but when released, they frequently go back to the donor in the form of payments for goods and technical services.

At the same time Western investors, enjoying the second phase of privatisation, do not stop to shouting how shares in juicier sectors of the Russian market are a sheer gold, because the assets they represent were undervalued.

In parallel with these political and economic disappointments, there is a waning of popular fascination with everything American. The window on the outside world provided, however imperfectly, by

television, tends to highlight the imperfections of the American model and the existence of alternatives.

The more they come face to face with it, the more Russians are put off by monolithic character of American culture, the deeper becomes the mental divide, and the urge to find a Russian model, however imperfect.

While the remarks of Albright can hardly remove all this incubus, they do lead policy-makers to expect more from the summit than might previously have been possible. This includes hope for some sign that Washington recognises Russia as a power in its own class.

As a senior Foreign Ministry

official puts it, there were always two stages to the establishment of a satisfactory post-Cold War partnership. The first was simply to establish relations. The second is for Russia and the US to become more than just "ordinary partners." The need now is to "give a new impulse to practical things," like projects of military co-operation.

But Russian policy-makers are realistically aware that any

OPINION

Political Exploitation

M M Ahmad

This message, from an educated citizen, at the close of his professional career (not politics), is addressed to our political leaders in general, and particularly to a section who are indulging in activities, which citizens like myself cannot understand, due to severe communication gap in explaining clearly the political philosophy and policies followed by some of the parties, particularly those who are now in the opposition. The names of the parties are incidental, as the spotlight is on the principle involved in the policies, which, in my opinion, do not appear to be in public or national interest.

The first of the fundamental issues to be sorted out, is when political activities have to be revolutionary, and when to practise evolutionary politics. Now it is found that the opposition has unleashed, with a vengeance, a programme of activities (destructive — in more than the physical sense) using the public as pawn to serve their interest, in the guise of national movement. The first of the fundamental issues to be sorted out, is when political activities have to be revolutionary, and when to practise evolutionary politics. Now it is found that the opposition has unleashed, with a vengeance, a programme of activities (destructive — in more than the physical sense) using the public as pawn to serve their interest, in the guise of national movement.

Every day of the 365 days in the life of the citizens — who make or unmake political leaders — cannot be spent in revolutionary political activities, catering to the whims of the eccentric political programmes of the parties who are out to achieve certain subjective target. Activists, in one form or another, will always be present in all societies. How the poor voters can have a control over their activities?

The question or the point at issue is the misuse of the public influence by the politicians, specially in the poor undeveloped countries, where the majority of the people barely exist at dismal poverty level. The other professions or sectors do not wield so much control over the masses. This political advantage should not be misused. The problem is that the politicians (in all countries) deliberately use this bestowed asset whether in power, or out of it. The difference in the Third World is one of kind, not of

degree. Now what is required, cynically speaking, is a revolutionary campaign, by the masses, to wash clean the errant leaders who retard the development of the country.

The conditions in Bangladesh are not similar to those in Palestine or Vietnam, where the new generation have no idea of normal peaceful living. The uprising against the autocratic regime was revolutionary. That does not mean that all future day-to-day political campaigns, after an elected government came into power, should be in similar style, that is, revolutionary. One point comes out very clearly: the style of politics has to be changed.

The tired citizens are up against psychological problems of some political leadership. The Awami League, headed by Bangabandhu, played a historic role during the creation of Bangladesh more than two decades ago. Since then this nostalgic part has not been able to return to power. Now the party is in such a hurry that it cannot wait for the 5-year term to end, and wishes to settle some issues through street agitations instead of sitting in the parliament.

How to explain this to the public? A Bangabandhu is not produced every generation. If AL comes into power, we should be prepared for a spirited witch-hunting leading possibly to another revolution, or law and order situation. AL has many scores to settle. It is a grey area, which nobody knows better than the leaders themselves. The commoners will be mere witnesses to the drama of history.

The second black problem is the flooding of the political market with black money from the previous regimes. Hence the style also depends on the affluence of any political party. Black money itches, and opens the Pandora's box, especially where the have-nots cannot resist temptation. Easy come, easy go, and the country can go to hell (it went near during the last 20 years). Image, erosion, benefit of doubt are important terms for the leaders to ponder upon. The purpose of writing this commentary is to ask when the freedom from the 'perverted' clutches will come. Perhaps we will get what we deserve, as per past records.

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.

Development of M C Academy

Sir, Educationally Golapganj thana is the most advanced thana in the entire greater Sylhet district. M C Academy is a college cum school at this thana headquarter. Roll strength of the Academy is very high. But in the college section it has been possible to open only Humanities and Commerce departments in HSC. Due to non-availability of fund Science building could not be constructed so far for opening Science department although a large number of students of the locality are willing to study science. Similarly there is no degree section in the Academy. As a result students passing HSC from the Academy and other institutions nearly have to move to Sylhet town for studying degree course. The Education Department is not taking any interest for construction of the Science building and also creating additional accommodation for opening of degree class.

In view of the great importance of the Academy, I request the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance and the Planning Commission to kindly rise to the occasion and do something for development of this much neglected Academy, in public interest.

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury
Dhaka Cantonment, Dhaka

Elevators

Sir, With the fast growth of high-rise commercial and private buildings in the capital city, the use of lifts has become a dire need. With this, proper maintenance and safety of lifts should be seriously taken into account. I am not

quite sure if there is any affiliate body or a separate inspectorate for lift management, if not, arrangements should be geared up to set one immediately, so as to keep up with the regular maintenance facilities, rather than depending on some importers.

There are quite a lot of lifts in the city which are outdated and are without proper automatic system. To mention about a few, following are some practical experiences: one of the lifts at the Scout Bhaban, Kakrai, needs immediate service, if not complete replacement. A few days ago myself along with four other gentlemen got such a fright of our lives while getting down from the 9th floor of the building.

The lift suddenly made a wild jerk and dropped us one and half feet below the ground floor. We were stuck up for about seven to ten minutes. Whew! The impact of the jerk could have very well stopped the heart-beat of any heart patient! The lift at a Dikusha building commercial area is like an ATP jet-liner. It starts off after a terrible jerk and continues to rattle till it reaches the required floor. The lift at the Power Development

Board building at Motijheel C/A is the weirdest of all. This one starts off with a wild kick and keeps on jerking with an awful sound. And on many occasions the lift operates on its own sweet will. No matter even if you have to climb to the rest of the 10th floor, making on half-deaf. The lift at the Islam Chamber has less complaints than the ones mentioned above, but the only problem with it is that the lifts are without calling buttons, for which you have got to do a lot of banging to draw the attention of the lift man.

Situations like above ones can be dangerous in private apartments also, where children and the housewives make most use of the lifts. Since, there is no choice left for us to save our breath but to climb high floors, we do need the help of lifts, but at the same time we would appeal to all concerned to look into the matter and make necessary replacements and take measures to arrange for monthly maintenance facilities. Otherwise, God forbid, we may soon hear of fatal accidents.

Moinuddin
Dhaka