

Forest Policy

On Thursday the country got a new forest policy. On the face of it, it looks comprehensive enough, touching on many of the endemic problems facing the forest sector. Under a 20-year master plan for afforestation, the country can really improve its records on this basic element of physical environment. It is an ambitious goal the policy has set for accomplishing. It seeks to bring 20 per cent of the country's land area under forest cover — both private and public — by the year 2015. Even more importantly, half of the forest land will be set aside for conservation.

The accomplishment of such a challenging goal over a period of 20 years means that the process will have to reach its culmination through an un-failing fulfilment of yearly, maybe, three-yearly or five-yearly targets fixed in advance. There is no short-cut in the task of growing trees or developing forest lands. The implication is that the country will have to conserve more forest areas as it grows more of these. Forest cover constitutes no more than eight to nine per cent of the country's land area, and yet the forest department has great difficulty conserving much of it.

Conservation alone will be a daunting task with so much of forest land. Now add to this the rapid growth of population. Currently, two-thirds of the country's total land area are under cultivation while the remainder is used up by roads, railways, human abodes and forests. Currently, the per head availability of land is only one-fifth of an acre. By the year 2015, the population is expected to more than double. More land will be needed as living spaces for such a huge population. So the natural question is, where will the land come from to undertake such a massive afforestation programme?

Well, the accreted coastal lands, fallow areas and denuded hills can be obtained for the purpose but the gains could be substantially offset by the increasing demand for residential land. But even from such a desperate situation we can do enough to expand the tree cover by maximising the use of whatever spare land we have, if the plan is intensively, methodically and meticulously implemented.

Different Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) have proved that the future of any afforestation programme lies in the hands of the poor. Their active participation through benefit-sharing has proved to be a success. The government seems to have taken a cue from the NGOs. Let the poor benefit from social forestry which has a great potential to secure the environmental future for the nation.

Power Shortage

Energy Minister Dr Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain has placed all the cards on the table about the dilemma in the power sector. What little he seems to have kept close to his chest however falls on us to say with a bit of professional responsibility. He said at a seminar on Power Sector Reform and its Effect on National Economy two days back that an additional 2300 megawatt would have to be generated at an astronomical cost of Tk 7,300 crore to level off with the accumulated demand of electricity in 2000 AD. Our present generation capacity is 1900 megawatt.

The long-term demand projection is apparently based on the current rate of suppressed demand, a demand that is going unmet in terms of individual craving, and perhaps with an eye to the requirement of the service and industrial sectors. Should there be a flaw in the demand assessment we shall be without one of the basic tools for economic take-off which is strongly predicted to happen by 2000 AD, of course, other things remaining the same. Our per capita consumption of electricity being the lowest in the region — 83 kilowatt per hour — way behind even the second lowest Sri Lanka's 196 kilowatt, the concept of 'suppressed demand' needs to be extended to include the whole range of potential economic demand for the next six years.

While the system loss must be plugged for its own sake, the money we can save from this area does look like a peanut before the Tk 7,300 crore investment we need to meet our demand for electrical power till 2000 AD. A ten per cent drop in the system loss is going to save us Tk 160 crore per year. At this rate, given the present total figure of system loss at 34.82 per cent we shall be saving at the most Tk 760 crore by completely stopping it. Since some percentage of loss is unavoidable, even that sum cannot be scraped.

The answers therefore lie in associating the private sector with the task as a commercial proposition and developing the alternative sources of energy, such as, bio-gas and solar power. Let's also start the process of involving India and Nepal in some regional hydel power projects.

Somalian Quicksand

President Clinton has sent his troops to Somalia again. The US mission, this time around, is to ensure a safe demobilisation of the UN peace-keeping troops from Somalia by March next year. Both in terms of the coming and going of troops and the prevailing situation in that country the vision that is conjured up is one of going back to square one in Somalia, if not worse.

When as many as 30 US soldiers died in a hateful vendetta, an earlier US mission in Somalia was wrapped up in the face of a tremendous pressure of public opinion in the USA. The US commanders left the unfinished job to the UN peace-keeping force which gained in troops strength subsequently to make for a presence of 15,000 men on the ground. Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani and Egyptian contingents are in it. The US leadership is now doing a good turn to the UN force and the national contingents in it by deciding to be by their side on the front-line of action in Somalia.

By the very admission of the UN representative in Somalia, the country is in the throes of a bloody civil war. The point is the UN peace-keepers go to a trouble-spot not to fight but to keep peace. Maintenance of law and order and implementation of a political agenda for local reconciliation must go hand in hand in a UN peace-keeping operation. Was the mandate adequate for a synchronisation of the two roles in Somalia? The Bosnian retreat, and now the Somalian tangle, should help us devise ways and means to ensure completion of UN peace-keeping missions. Retreat does not get a good name for the world body.

In certain quarters there is some confusion about what foreign policy is all about. To them, it is still concerned with arms race, ideological rivalry, a policy of confrontation and conflict for gaining foreign territory resources or sheer supremacy over rival nations. Dictators, military juntas or even small ruling elites are seen as the main actors in the play. Their aim is to promote selfish and narrowly conceived group or partisan interest oblivious of the welfare or the views of the commonman. Intrigues, betrayals playing one side against the other under cover of complete secrecy are believed to be the tools used in the drama.

This no doubt is an utterly distorted idea about the objectives as well as the operational methods of diplomacy. It is true that at certain times and in some countries things used to be that way. But we have moved a long way from that position. Many factors have contributed to this change.

The emergence of the subjugated nations of Asia, Africa and Latin America to independence after the Second World War, spread of democracy and education, spectacular improvements in the means of communications may be men-

Evolving Foreign Policy Perspectives

by Abul Ahsan

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Competing Foreign Policy Agenda

The most dramatic impact on foreign policy perceptions however has come about from the recent changes in the global political and security parameters. These changes are symbolized by the drastic erosion of communism as a competing ideology, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Socialist states of Eastern Europe and the increasing role being played by the United Nations in matters related to security, war and peace. As a consequence conflict, tension and situations arising out of arms race and continuously escalating expenditures on defence and newer and more deadly means of death and destruction have been contained and even reversed. The unique position that nation states have so far enjoyed, both as the main subject and the objects of international relations, are be-

ing challenged by the increasing sway that the multinationals are holding in economic and industrial matters. Almost everywhere the emergence of the reality of global market place for the production, distribution and exchange of goods and services as well as the so-called international financial revolution makes all the difference.

The unprecedented rise in world population which continues unabated and is mostly confined to poor societies, the threat of large scale international migration because of ethnic and religious conflicts and the economic and ecological crises in many parts of the world are engaging the attention of both regional and world leaders. The questions of terrorism and the drugs are now subject matters of debates and discussions in SAARC and other forums. Military threats and the arms race are gradually being replaced by eco-

nomic rivalries, technology races and various forms of commercial warfare among nations, some of which have been close cold war friends and allies. Questions of democracy, human rights, empowerment of the poor and the environment, which have long been considered the exclusive preserves of states are now on the global agenda. There is growing realisation that no stable peace and durable international arrangements are possible without addressing these problems.

New Thrusts and Emerging Priorities

But the objectives of the foreign policy still remain the same as they must i.e. to protect and promote national interests and values. The latter include safeguarding the security and independence of the country and upholding its economic, social and cultural interests.

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ferred to earlier imply new thrusts and added dimensions to the existing concept of foreign policy. There must be a renewed emphasis on trade, investment, transfer of technology and cooperation among nations in educational and scientific fields. The improvement of socio-economic conditions of the masses are increasingly being seen as priority objectives of foreign policy.

Finally there is no denying the validity of the old adage that foreign policy is an extension of domestic policy. President Clinton once said that the United States must be strong domestically if it wanted to be strong globally. He said this by way of justifying a shift away from US foreign involvement, a cold war legacy to the new situation confronting his country which was in a condition of relative decline — economically. For a country like Bangladesh the precept is equally or even more true. One cannot represent or promote that one does not have. Our journey to an effective foreign policy must begin at home. Consequently, with streaming our missions abroad we must have strong and stable democratic institutions, a national consensus on basic security and foreign policy issues, an educated and skilled manpower base and a vibrant and broad-based economy at home. Much of what we hope to gain from our foreign policy involvements abroad will then be close to realisation.

The author is a former Foreign Secretary. He also served as the first SAARC Secretary-General.

The Spirit of Liberation

As we celebrate 16 December as victory day, a question naturally arises where we have come now since that day of 1971. On this twenty-third anniversary, of emergence of sovereign and independent Bangladesh through a nine month-long bloody struggle. Three million people laid their lives to liberate the country from the domination and occupation of Pakistani forces. What was the driving force behind in facing the enemy undaunted, and embracing death, till liberation of this soil? The Savar National Mausoleum epitomizes the victory, sacrifices of the Martyrs and untold suffering of women folk. Can't we behold in our mind's eye the events for a while and takes a reading from history? National Independence, economic emancipation and international co-operation on equal footing were the spirit.

A few milestones from last half a century: The people of this country always raised heroic struggle against the British Raj for freedom and did not hesitate to sacrifice their lives. In the topsy-turvy course of political movements in India, under the British policy of divide and rule, the people of this part of subcontinent felt that their emancipation lied in their support to Muslim League demanding Pakistan on the basis of 'Two-Nation Theory' in the mid 40s. Pakistan came into being on 14th August 1947 as an independent state. Hardly six months had elapsed since establishment of Pakistan, the design of Pakistan ruling clique was surfaced by their decision on Bengal, the language of its eastern wing. But the Bengal people made no delay to understand that they were duped in the name of Islam and that as a matter of fact, British rulers had been replaced by Pakistani rulers. A natural opposition grew against the Government of Pakistan and their lackeys in the then East Bengal, who were all out after the posts, property and business, left by the British, and Hindus migrating to India. The general mass had no connection whatsoever, with that coterie of self-seekers at the top level of the society and their becoming rich

overnight. The lower and middle class people were growing under poverty and deprivation as before.

The historic language movement culminating in February 21, 1952 united the people against the ruling Muslim League Government. In the general election of 1954, Muslim League was ignominiously defeated and Jukta Front won 223 seats out of 237 Muslim seats. But, Jukta Front council of ministers were dissolved by applying Section 92 (A), when they were in power for only one month 26 days. In 1957, the mass leader Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani virtually hinted a good-bye to Pakistan during the Kagnari conference. With the declaration of 6-point demand in 1966 by Sheikh Mujib, Rahman the country entered into a new phase of movement towards freedom. The burning passion for independence imbedded people to

vote for Awami League. Which secured a landslide victory in 1970 election. But, Pakistan Military Junta refused to hand over power. Sheikh Mujib declared on 7th March 1971: Our struggle this time is the struggle for freedom — our struggle this time is for independence. Simultaneously, he declared programmes for movement. On 25th March 1971, Pakistani occupation forces attacked the unarmed Bangalees at Dhaka and arrested Sheikh Mujib.

On 26th March 1971, Haji, a Chittagong Awami League leader read out the declaration of Independence of Bangladesh by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Rahman. On the following day, 27th March, Major Ziaur Rahman urged the people over Radio to join the freedom struggle under the leadership of Sheikh Mujib Rahman. It ensued the nine-month long bloody liberation struggle, participated by all sections of Bangalees — peasants, workers, businessmen, teachers, employees, students, armed forces, police, BDR, political parties, professionals and the Mujibnagar Government. In other words, Bangalees from all walks of life, except collab-

orators took part in this movement.

Immediately after the day of victory on the 16th December, 1971, Government of Bangladesh was to resurrect a ravaged land; and undertake post-war reconstruction, relief and rehabilitation; install an administration to run the affairs of the sovereign state. Sheikh Mujib returned to his homeland, after his release from Pakistan jail on 10 January, 1972 and addressed the largest ever rally held in Bangladesh. He assumed the office of Prime Minister on 11 January 1972. At his call the Indian Army, who supported our liberation forces, left Bangladesh within twelve weeks of the victory. He called upon all to build a golden Bangladesh. Bangladesh continued to receive recognition from governments of other countries to its independence.

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years have passed by. He has seen Martial Laws of General Ziaur Rahman and General HM Ershad. General Zia once said "I will make politics difficult for politicians." He formed Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) on September 1, 1978. His new party got majority in the parliament election on 18 February, 1979. General Ershad formed Jatiya Party on January 1, 1986. His new party won majority in 3rd parliament election on May 7, 1986 and again on 4th parliament election on March 3, 1988. During the period from 15 August, 1975 till the fall of the Ershad regime on 6 December, 1990, the presidential form of government, with 'rubber stamp parliament' was the main feature. To many, it was autocracy, which was against the spirit of liberation war. In the background of the mass upsurge of 1990, neutral and impartial government of the Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, a free, fair and impartial election to 5th-parliament was held on 27 February, 1991. BNP chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia, became prime minister on 19 March, 1991. Through Twelfth Amendment parliamentary form of govern-

ment was introduced. To protest the appointment of Golam Azam the infamous collaborator, as Amir of Jamaat-e-Islami and to demand his trial, a committee for the elimination of killers and collaborators were formed on January 19, 1992, with the leader of Jamaat-e-Islami as its Convener.

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Taiwan. We see Vietnam and Cambodia now taking the road to quick progress. All are being rated as high performing Asian economies. And where are we now? Say in employment, industry, education, power and gas, water, forestry, fisheries, health or any other sector? Everywhere there are dismal statistics. Systems loss, campus violence, rampant corruption and deteriorating law and order situation etc. More than 90 per cent of the population is suffering agony. Perhaps only one per cent, the ruling elites and the beneficiaries of the past regimes, may be deriving whatever ecstasy there is by keeping politics, administration and economy of the country in their hitherto firm grip.

Bangladesh is at the bottom of even SAARC countries, having a trade deficit also with Bhutan! Let the Planning Commission, Bangladesh Institute of Administration and Management (who have incorporated moral values as an element of training) and Ministry of Establishment find a way to obviate the impasse. In this connection, emergence of NGOs run on foreign donations, from 1976, and their gradual expansion till now deserve attention of all concerned. The huge NGO community also could make little impact raising the low per capita income!

To sum up, Bangladesh has reached this staggering situation due to apparent or implied obstruction to implementation of the spirit of liberation over the last couple of decades in economic development, social and political progress. But the people are always ready to sacrifice for envisaged emancipation. And that's the spirit still forming in their heart even after the lapse of 23 years. The freedom fighters and their children, the new generation, will, no doubt, be able to eliminate the enemies opposing development and respect peaceful place for Bangladesh in the comity of nations. That positive attitude is gaining ground hopefully.

It is a fact that many of our Asian neighbours who were at par with or behind us twenty years back, are now ahead of us and progressing speedily. We only wonder at the rapid progress of Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, and

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