

FOCUS

Depletion of Global Natural Resources

Who is Responsible?

by Tarequl Islam Munna



THE United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) convened in Cairo, Egypt, in September last year, gathering political leaders from around the globe to explore how human population growth is likely to affect society and the environment. One of the policy issues participants discussed was the links between human population, sustainable development and the environment.

Each year, about 90 million new people join the human race. This is roughly equivalent to adding three Canadas or another Mexico to the world annually, a rate of growth that will swell human numbers from today's 5.6 bil-

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lion to about 8.5 billion by 2025.

These figures represent the fastest growth in human numbers ever recorded and raise many vital economic and environmental questions. Is our species reproducing so quickly that we are outpacing the Earth's ability to house and feed us? Is our demand for natural resources destroying the habitats that give us life? If 40 million acres of tropical forest - an area equivalent to twice the size of Austria - are being destroyed or grossly degraded every year, as satellite maps show, how will that affect us? If 27,000 species become extinct yearly because of human development, as some scientists believe, what will that mean for us? If nearly 2 billion people already lack adequate drinking water, a number likely to increase to 3.6 billion by the year 2000, how can all of us hope to survive?

Modern technologies and improved efficiency in the use of resources can help to stretch the availability of limited resources. Consumption levels also exert considerable impact on our resource base. Population pressures work in conjunction with these other factors to determine, to a large extent, our total impact on resources.

For example, although everyone contributes to resource waste, the world's bottom-billion poorest and top-billion richest do most of the environmental damage.

Poverty compels the world's 1.2 billion bottom-most poor to misuse their environment and ravage resources, while lack of access to better technologies, credit, education, health care and family-planning condemns them to

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subistence patterns that offer little chance for concern about their environment. This contrasts with the richest 1.3 billion, who exploit and consume disproportionate amounts of resources and generate disproportionate quantities of waste.

One example is energy consumption. Whereas the

average Bangladeshi consumes commercial energy equivalent to three barrels of oil yearly, each American consumes an average of 55 barrels. Population growth in Bangladesh, one of the poorest nations, led to increased energy use in 1990 by the equivalent of 8.7 million barrels, while US population growth in the same year increased energy use by 110 million barrels. Of course, the US population of 250 million is more than twice the size of the Bangladeshi population of 113 million, but even if the consumption figures are adjusted for the difference in size, the slower growing US population still increases its energy consumption six or seven times faster yearly than does the more rapidly growing Bangladeshi population.

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In the future, the effects of population growth on natural resources will vary locally because growth occurs unevenly across the globe. Over

the turn of the century, Africa's population will increase from 700 million to 867 million; and Latin America's from 470 million to 538 million. By the year 2000, the Third World's total population is expected to be nearly 5 billion; only 1.3 billion people will reside in industrialized countries. The United Nations esti-

mates that world population will near 11.2 billion by 2100. However, this figure is based on the assumption that growth rates will drop. If present rates continue, world population will stand at 10 billion by 2030 and 40 billion by 2110.

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The United Nations Population Fund estimates that to achieve the 11.2 billion projection, the number of couples using family planning services - such as modern contraceptives - in the developing world will have to rise to 567 million by the year 2000 and to 1.2 billion by 2025. In sub-Saharan Africa this means a 10-fold increase by 2025 in the number of people who use family planning. If these measures do not succeed,

human population growth could blast the 11.2 billion figure clear out of the ball park. Perhaps the most ominous aspect of today's unprecedented growth is its persistence, despite falling annual population growth rates everywhere except in parts of Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. Annual global population growth stands at 1.6 per cent, down from 2 per cent in the early 1970s. Similarly, the total fertility rate (the average number of children a woman is likely to have) has dropped from a global average of six only three decades ago to slightly more than three today.

Population continues to grow because of tremendous demographic momentum. China's annual growth rate, for example, is only 1.2 per cent. However, the country's huge population base - 1.2 billion people - translates this relatively small rate of growth into a net increase in China's population of around 15 million yearly. Clearly, any attempt to slow population growth is a decades-long process affected by advances in medicine, extended life spans and reduced infant, child and maternal mortality.

The answers are hardly easy and go beyond simple demographics since population works in conjunction with other factors to determine our total impact on resources.

The writer is an Hon. Associate Estate Planner of RARA AVIS SOCIETY (from the Latin for "rare bird") USA.

CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS

In Search of a Way Out

'Solution is Possible if Opposition MPs Return to Parliament'

An Interview with BNP Standing Committee Member Barrister Rafiqul Islam Mia by Chapal Bashar



BNP Standing Committee member Barrister Rafiqul Islam Mia believes that lack of understanding among political forces is the main problem which should be solved first to ensure smooth holding of a fair election.

He said that the solution of the constitutional crisis, created over the election issue, is possible if the opposition MPs return to Parliament and settle the dispute through discussions.

The door of understanding is still open," said Barrister Rafique, who is also the Minister for Housing and Public Works.

In an interview with The Daily Star the minister expressed his views on the Opposition's demand for holding elections under a caretaker government and dwelt on the constitutional points related with the issue.

The BNP leader contradicted Awami League Law Secretary Barrister KS Nabi's contentions published in this interview series on July 17. Refuting KS Nabi's allegation that the ruling BNP has created the ongoing political impasse, he said, "Opposition is fully responsible for the present situation - the crisis was initiated by them through a walkout followed by their prolonged boycott of the House. Then they filed the so-called resignation letters keeping themselves absent from Parliament proceedings."

Barrister Rafique raised questions about the Opposition's demand for holding elections under a caretaker government and said this will not ensure a free and fair election.

"The issue should be how to hold a fair election with voters casting their ballots without fear," he said adding, "such a major issue has been lost in the turmoil created on the question of a caretaker government."

Rafiqul Islam observed that a fair election is only possible if all the parties sincerely followed the code of conduct during polls and the candidates kept their ex-

penditures within the limit fixed by the Election Commission.

He suggested that the existing permissible limit of Taka three lakh may be increased a little if necessary, and said, "It should be strictly maintained by all the candidates. Unlimited expenses by the candidates is the root of all problems that hinder smooth holding of free and fair elections. Illegal expenditure is the source of illegal arms - it brings *mas-taans* to create violence. Therefore, thrusts should be on strengthening the EC and maintaining an agreed code of conduct."

Opposing the idea of a caretaker government, the BNP leader further said, "It is absolutely contrary to the basic principles of democracy since such government will be a nominated one to replace an elected government. Democratic government acquires legitimacy to run the affairs of the state through mandate of the electorate, but a nominated government cannot have that legitimacy." He cautioned that there will be every possibility that the High Court may declare such a nominated government as "illegal and without jurisdiction to run the affairs of the government since it will have no legitimacy."

He dismissed KS Nabi's claim that the existing Parliament is not legal since it is devoid of power to amend the constitution due to the absence of 147 MPs. The BNP leader argued that so long as his party enjoys the support of the majority of all MPs, the government as well as the Parliament will remain legal. "If some members voluntarily do not participate in the proceedings of the House, this cannot affect the right of the majority members to run the Parliament and the government as per provision of the constitution."

He said, adding, "One cannot lose his right due to absence of another - the government has never kept the House half-empty, it is the Opposition who are remaining absent and therefore they are accountable to the people for that. We were elected for five

years by the electorate and we are accountable to them."

About KS Nabi's reference to British Prime Minister John Major's decision to have a fresh mandate from the party, and the mid-term election in Nepal, he said that these examples are not applicable here. "Our situation is different and has no relevance to those of Britain and Nepal. Major's leadership was challenged by his party MPs while in Nepal the Prime Minister lost confidence in Parliament."

Rafique also disagreed with Nabi about his claim that Opposition parties represent 69 per cent of the population. "The percentage of votes secured by a party is not considerable, according to our constitution - the question is how many MPs you have in the Parliament. They (Opposition) are trying to mislead our people about the constitutional provision regarding formation of government," he maintained.

The BNP leader contradicted KS Nabi's interpretation of Article 72 of the constitution and quoting Articles 56 and 57 he said, "Even after loss of confidence in the House, a Prime Minister continues until a new PM takes over."

He also quoted Article 56 (3) which says: The President shall appoint as Prime Minister the Member of Parliament who appears to him to command the support of the majority of the members of Parliament. "President cannot choose anybody as head of government since it will be contrary to norms of Parliamentary democracy" Rafique said emphatically.

Quoting Article 7, he said all powers of the republic belong to the people and the people will exercise the power through ballots.

He also opposed the idea of post-facto ratification of anything related to the constitution in the newly-elected parliament saying, "The idea itself is contrary to democratic principles and it could be challenged in the court of law. If such action or post-facto ratification is declared illegal, then there will be a vacuum and uncertainty; no elected government can afford that situation."

The BNP leader repeated that a solution of the ongoing crisis is still possible, but there should be an agreed formula on the basis of consensus for which the Opposition must attend the Parliament.

"Political sagacity, intelligence, experience, honesty, sincerity and far-sightedness are the basic qualities needed to become a politician. And our politicians must possess all these to serve the people better," he concluded.

Diversity and Quality in Britain's Higher Education

by Kwasi Gyan-Apenteng



Matriculation Day at Oxford University

IN the current marketplace jargon, higher education in the United Kingdom can be justly described as a "growth industry", having experienced a period of unprecedented expansion throughout the 1980s and the early part of the 1990s.

An example of this development is reflected in the fact that whereas in 1979 one in eight young people entered higher education of any sort, the ratio in 1994 was close to one in three. In total, the doubling of the number of higher education students in Britain between 1979 and 1983 has brought the figure to some 1.5 million, with the fastest expansion occurring since 1988.

An accompanying phenomenon is the interest shown by mature students: since 1979 their numbers have increased by more than 140%, twice as fast as young students. Over half of mature students are studying part-time, compared with a tenth of young students.

Higher Qualifications

The phenomenal explosion of the number of mature students in the late 1980s might suggest that people took advantage of enforced idleness in the recession to go into higher education to seek higher qualifications or prepare for a change of direction. Whatever the cause, all this added to the UK currently enjoying the highest proportion of graduates in the relevant age group in the European Union.

But it was not always so. Before the rapid expansion began, Britain was seen as lagging behind its European partners in comparisons of the proportion of young people in higher education. In early 1989 Kenneth Baker, then Education Secretary, launched an initiative designed to achieve a goal of one in three by the year 2000.

Years Ahead

An article in the Education Supplement of "The Independent" newspaper in January 1995 claimed that the target was achieved seven years ahead of schedule, "surprising both official plan-

ners and ministers". Naturally, there are dark hints about falling standards from those who thought that the rapid expansion of higher education would lead to an erosion in quality.

But quality has not been sacrificed, judging from the range of subjects, the level of study and the results. According to official statistics, the number of graduates gaining first degrees in 1992 was, at 156,000, 50% higher than in 1979. More than one third of the new graduates qualified in science. Of the 1992 graduates whose destination was known six months after graduation, 56% or 73,000 had entered UK or overseas employment, and there were signs that the number and proportion entering employment rose in 1993 as the economy started to recover.

Quality has a special significance for providers of

higher education, not only in terms of teaching and preparing students, but for research as well. This is a very important aspect of the work of universities and colleges, as they are the main providers of basic research and much of the strategic research carried out in the UK. They also increasingly collaborate with the private sector in the conduct of specific applied research.

Selectively Based

In fact, the quality of an institution's research affects its funding because, for example, the vast majority of research funds from the Higher Education Funding Council for England is allocated selectively based on the quality of research. Some institutions are more successful than others in the competition.

higher education facilities show a diversity in choice which overall helps to keep the quality of education high. In England alone, the Higher Education Funding Council funds some 130 higher education institutions comprising 72 universities and 50 colleges. The universities include 34 new universities - mostly former polytechnics - and the eight directly funded schools of the University of London.

These institutions vary in size from a few hundred students, such as at the College of Guidance Studies, to over 100,000 students (the Open University). Of the universities, over 50 of them with between 7,000 and 27,000 students offer virtually the full range of academic subject categories.

Colleges of higher education include general and specialist institutions.

Although most of them are smaller than universities and offer a smaller range of courses, they nonetheless award degrees which are validated by universities. Large colleges, usually with more than 3000 students, focus on business and management studies, humanities and education.

Specialist Colleges

There are 17 specialist colleges which offer courses in just one academic subject area such as art and design, business and management, education, medicine or music. Although 16 institutions were established by church bodies to provide teacher training, most have now diversified their subject provision.

Higher education is also provided by another category of institutions, further education colleges of which there

are some 300. More than 100 of these colleges offer degree courses which are validated by universities.

Vital Role

There is no doubt that universities and colleges play a vital role in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the UK, and the recent expansion has meant that an increasing number of people are participating in the shaping of the society. - LPS

Polls Advancing, but Uncertainty Prevails

by Abul Kalam Azad

THE latest political scenario of the country witnesses widening differences between the ruling and major opposition political parties over how to ensure free and fair election that is coming up.

Following the crossing of the 90-day limit of over 140 opposition MPs continuous absence from parliament, it has mostly been cleared now that the seats of the MPs no more exist and the country is eyeing three categories of parliamentary elections - "general" favoured ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), "by" belonging to the constitution, and "mid-term" demanded by the major opposition political parties.

The ruling party, facing constitutional difficulties in avoiding the by-elections to the seats months ahead of the expiry of fifth parliament, is seemingly trying to complete its five-year tenure in power and hold election to the sixth parliament in time, probably in next winter. The by-elections-related constitutional provisions are now under interpretation of Supreme Court.

At its several high level meetings arranged to avert the difficulties over last fifteen days the BNP was also seen preparing for the coming election. The party chief and Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, who has also been informally campaigning for the unannounced polls for a few months at the public meetings, discussed matter

relating to the nominations of her party candidates.

The major opposition political parties, especially the Awami League (AL), are apparently wooing the voters and demanding immediate dissolution of the fifth parliament and holding next elections under a non-partisan, neutral caretaker government. They are terming the BNP's move to avert by-elections.

The AL central working committee recently held a crucial meeting at which the party chief Sheikh Hasina directed her partymen to be prepared for election. But, on the other hand, no headway has been made so far in settling the nearly one-and-a-half-year old row over ways and means for conducting free and fair elections between the ruling and the opposition parties, who have been boycotting parliament sessions since March 1 and tendered resignation from the parliament on December 28 last year.

Meanwhile, the recruitment of Justice Shadok as Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and the voter registration campaign have deepened the row as the three major opposition political parties - AL, Jatiya Party (JP) and Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh - raised objections about the recruitment of the new, CEC and certain anomalies in the voter registration process.

The opposition parties, who are expected to intensify agitation from August next to

realise their demand, have described the BNP's move to avert by-elections as step to prolong its rule. But the BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia sticks to her earlier offer to quit one month ahead of election in response to her resignation demand for her caretaker administration.

However, the two sides are still far apart from an agreement and have showed no signs for an immediate breakthrough in the impasse.

In this situation, observers apprehend that a final disagreement may hinder the ensuing election or keep the presently agitating parties out of it election and thus destroy the already hurt prospects for democratic norms in the country.

Observers feel that despite the negative signs, the parties might realise the harsh consequences of the disagreement and extend their hands to settle the dispute. Such a positive course of action can start through negotiating a time ahead of election when the Prime Minister would quit as chief of the party-led government.

They also believe that a negotiated settlement could be able to bring in any amendment to the constitution, if so needed and even any referendum, to overcome any political, legal as well as constitutional crisis like the difficulties in avoiding by-elections the ruling party is facing now.