

Welcome Move by EC

We welcome the Election Commission's decision to debar bank loan defaulters from contesting the parliamentary elections. This will be implemented through a law to be enacted in due course.

Two points arise from the circumstances in which the EC has taken this move. First of all, the mainstream opposition was not present in the meeting where this decision was adopted. Secondly, the proposed law is not poised to be passed by a full parliament as the opposition remains out of it.

Whatever may be the opposition political parties' reasoning behind their boycott of the EC meeting or indeed their known reservations about the CEC, here is one imperative which they should wholeheartedly identify themselves with. Both by public statements, and in writing, to the EC, they have left none in doubt whatsoever that they are for an adequate measure to exclude loan defaulters from the election race. There has been a groundswell of public support for this, too. The electorate is perceptively wary of the dark ways in which money is put to use prior to or at the polls. It is not just an ethical question for them, they are also apprehensive of being operatively incapacitated in making the right choices when confronted with money-induced *fait accompli*. So, it was only natural for the opposition to demand that the delinquent loanees keep out. And who knows, if the opposition had not clamoured for it, the whole thing might have been side-stepped!

Mechanically the opposition was not present in the EC meeting on Monday but this hardly comes in the way of their appreciating that the principle they stood for has been adopted by the EC with the ruling party concurring in it as well. This makes things easier on the whole.

The opposition must now see the wisdom of upholding the EC's decision for the good of the elections and indeed for the future of our democracy.

As for law-making on the subject, which is of substantive importance, may we add a stipulation to the effect that the law should be fool-proof without any by-passes for any person to circumvent it through. Influential people have a way of skirting such a law. Furthermore, could the legitimate views of the opposition be reflected through the enactment process, irrespective of their absence in the parliament?

Bus Dacoity in City

A thriller was enacted live when dacoits boarded a bus near Jatrabari and got off at Tikatully with cash and valuables worth one lakh taka. The robbery is the first of its kind in the city and certainly adds to the growing list of criminal incidents. Dacoits have waylaid buses on long routes and mostly at night-time, but in this case the whole operation was carried out by the gang in a running bus in broad daylight and that, too, through the thick of traffic.

As we have often witnessed, any crime with some elements of novelty in it happens to be repeated until adequate measures are taken to combat it. It is said that criminals are always ahead of the police. By the time law enforcers come to grips with a particular type of crime, the perpetrators will have learnt newer methods to elude it. In our country criminal ingenuity could not have been much of a problem had there been police promptitude to nip it in the bud.

Handicraft Marketing

Undoubtedly, Bangladesh has earned an enviable reputation for turning out an array of handicraft. However, this sense of pride gets greatly dented the moment we come to know that our salesmanship leaves ample room for improvement. Johanna C Lockhart, a US handicraft consultant, confirms this after making a thorough survey of the local handicraft scene. She has been highly impressed by the quality of our products but laments that they have had little exposure to the American market.

We agree that craftsmanship has no alternative but in a competitive market products of similar quality have an edge over each other only through a marketing drive. On that count, Bangladeshi handicraft appear to be orphaned. Because neither the government nor the private sector is keen on a vigorous promotion of handicraft in the foreign market. Our marketing drive, if any, has been at a primitive stage with no urgency in evidence for taking advantage of modern packaging and advertising technologies. The US consultant has exposed in so many words our lacking in the promotional activities. It is, therefore, time that both the government — which is interested in diversification of export — and the private organisations put their acts together to reach the message of our products' high quality to the foreign clientele.

An investment in market research, publicity campaign, market-monitoring etc is a part of the game. Exposure to world-wide customers will give the confidence of going global, extensively and aggressively. And that is a sure way to profitability and, therefore, to success.

RIVERS of Life is a recent publication of the Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies where Bangladesh journalists take a critical look at the flood action plan. It is based on extensive travel and discussions with the farmers, women, fishermen and landless poor as the recipients of benefits on the one hand, and planners and engineers of flood control projects and programmes of Bangladesh on the other. The journalists, no doubt, performed a unique task which had never been done before. Instead of the usual top-down approach to development, the book is a sharp pointer to a people-sensitive approach where the assumption is that those who confront the problem might not be aware of the optimum engineering solution but are fully competent to respond to what had happened in the past when such engineering solutions were imposed upon them.

The result is a highly critical review of the massive undertakings of enormous controls which had never been tried before, although conceived after spending 150 million dollars within the fabulous dream chambers of the biggest ever flood action plan. The FAP has been best summed up by Sakhina, a Tangail resident where the FAP is now being implemented as the pilot phase, and as quoted in the book: "They will promise us the sky, cut up our land, build ugly, anti-people structures and then disappear into the thin air".

The book begins with the conclusive remark, "the flooding during June-September monsoon season performs many vital functions. Among other things, floods recharge underground water supplies, replenish soils with nutrients and provide breeding and feeding

grounds for fish". At the same time, although rural poverty is a general phenomenon in Bangladesh, there are certain pockets of chronic distress alongside major rivers where erosion is a living reality and combined with high floods, thousands of families are rendered homeless every year. Therefore, it would not be correct to accept the view that "Bangladesh peasants accept the risk of occasional disasters for the sake of good yields at other times".

Good and Evil

Flood is good Flood is evil. It is both at the same time. The critical look at FAP seems to lead to the extreme position of flood is good only and embankments would be breached bringing in worst disasters. On the other hand, FAP advocates confirm exactly the opposite view of flood as the unmitigating disaster. Obviously, the correct view is somewhere in between. The name itself, Flood Action Plan, is the reflection of a biased approach of preventing the evil called flood. It is not correct. Perhaps a possible balanced view could be worked out if the objective is not flood prevention but to detail an integrated plan for land and water resources development which would sustain the annual nourishment for soil and fishes; and at the same time, enable human life to not only endure but prevail at substantially higher levels of living with adequate nutrition, education and health for all.

The story of two villages (Page 11, chapter 1) of the failure of a project village within DND project area, and the success of another village without project benefits clearly established the case in favour of beneficial floods which must not be denied to crop agriculture. The results of Meghna-Dhonagoda scheme are also worth noting. Although it destroyed local



Window on Asia

Shahed Latif

fresh water fishery, the increase in foodgrain production seems to be phenomenon. However, can the loss of fishery be compensated by gains in cereal outputs? The figures quoted seem to be wrong since 17,500 hectares cannot increase cereal production from 32,000 tons to as much as 1.2 million tons. I will suggest that all the figures quoted in the book may be double checked before the second edition is printed. The losses in fishery resources are very real and genuine. So far flood control projects have tended to ignore the fishery sector, where the people gainfully employed are one of the poorest and disadvantaged landless groups. This important distributive aspect have been sharply brought out in several chapters of the book.

One of the highlights of the publication is its detailed portrayal of the plight of women. Never before, their concerns were taken into account in the formulation of water control projects. Also water borne diseases are the giant killers and in any people-centred approach to development, it is far more important to provide access to pure drinking water and proper sanitation before any elaborate flood action plan. These vital issues have been ably portrayed and for the first time, all the suggestions put together constitute a brilliant holistic approach to land and water resources development of Bangladesh.

Resettlement

Another important issue considered is resettlement,

The embankment intensive FAP would call for land acquisition on a massive scale. The question therefore naturally arises if we possess the required management capacity to ensure the resettlement of the disposed. The problem has been well brought out in chapter 6 where the suggestions of char dwellers should be of considerable interest to any flood action planner. These are: (i) mapping of permanent char lands, (ii) raising village homestead areas above flood levels and, (iii) shelters and boats to deal with flood emergencies. Char dwellers are most vulnerable to floods. They do not want embankments since they know that flood is also the life blood. So, why shouldn't we listen to them? *Rivers of Life* is a milestone publication which has opened the voice of those who are silent while suffering the most from floods.

I must, however, point out that the Bangladeshi engineers who are at the helm of affairs at FAP office are dedicated individuals. No one should have any doubt about their integrity. I know for certain that Mr Siddique of FAP is a freedom fighter. He was seriously injured while fighting the war in 1971. He must have worked for a genuine cause and out of sheer patriotism, felt compelled to draw up plans parallel to the flood control schemes for the mighty Mississippi. Consequently, the FAP consists of bold aspirations which tend to be overambitious; it is visionary but not realizable and in the relentless pursuit of controlling the floods, the plan is to deny the land of its

essential nutrients and the fish from necessary breeding for sustainable yield in the future.

Practical engineers, like Mr Siddique of FAP, I am sure, fully aware of grim management realities of Bangladesh. Furthermore, what had been achieved in the United States or Holland, might not be feasible in the floodplains of Bangladesh, not only because of the three mighty rivers but the continuing need to flood the low lands every year. Those are mostly wet lands and must be allowed to remain as such. The book has ably explained that the rivers of life would turn the lands lifeless unless they are allowed to spill over the banks every year. So why build the embankments as planned under the FAP? It would not increase food production. After all, flood is always a time bound phenomenon. It cannot affect more than one cropping season, leaving two other cropping seasons for secured and bountiful harvests, which would not be feasible without the nourishments from the annual flooding.

The FAP for achieving the essential food self-sufficiency is an ill-conceived argument, hardly justified by the facts of the case. It should be known to the FAP authorities that over 90 per cent of incremental cereal production since the 1960s originated from rabi season crops which is furthest from floods but nearest to irrigation. Hence irrigation action plan rather than Flood Action Plan is what we need today. In addition, for the estimated population of 140 million in the year 2000, and at the average rate of daily consumption of 15.5 ounces per capita, cereal consumption would amount to 22.5 million tons. If through domestic production and import, demand for wheat is assumed to be 2.5 million tons, then domestic paddy production for self-sufficiency should amount to 32.8 million tons, including 10 per cent seed, feed and waste; and, three tons of paddy yielding two tons of rice.

FAP: Not a Valued Argument

We do not require FAP for this. Three million hectares

of flood-free paddy land which we have, is capable of growing HYV aman paddy followed by HYV aman, usually under rainfed conditions and total paddy production only from these lands should amount to 30 million tons — that is more than 90 per cent of the estimated requirements of the country in the year 2000. Our potential for increasing paddy production is enormous without any flood control but not without irrigation. We can feed ourselves for generations since we are expected to achieve stable population by the second decade of 21st century. Therefore FAP for food is not a valid argument.

I was venturing this article at a time when half the nation was under the grip of floods. Proponents of FAP might argue, how can I be so ignorant of the prevailing situation. I am not. We need flood action plan but of a different kind. The brutal realities of flood cannot be ignored. We need protection against the flood but not for the floodplains in general.

The vitally required FAP should concentrate on protecting the human settlements, the villages, towns, ports and cities of the country including connecting road communications from the ravages of destruction. Let the cultivable floodplains get under water, but the human settlements should be capable of remaining above water like islands with good drainage systems within, in order to drain out accumulating rain waters. Secondly, human settlements subjected to erosion should also be protected. Thus the nature of the plan will be very drastically altered. Instead of containing mighty rivers within their embanked course of water flows, the strategy should be to free the rivers to meander themselves as they will but the same rivers should be contained when they erode the towns and villages or engulf them in water — leaving no high ground to survive. FAP should mainly be a human settlement protection and water conservation for irrigation programme which itself is an enormous task but within the realm of possibilities, within the next 5 to 10 years period.

Death Sentence for Filipina Maid

Sarah Balabagan, a teenage housemaid from the Philippines, who was accused of killing her local employer after he allegedly raped her at knife-point last year was sentenced to death by the Al Ain Shariah Court recently after a three member panel of judges found her guilty of pre-meditated murder. Moroccan judge Sheikh Ahmed Al Titwani, who chaired the panel of judges, said that the verdict was only a primary and not a final one and could be appealed within 15 days.

The defendant who has earlier confessed at the court of stabbing the victim several times, defended her act to protect herself and her honour, has however, appealed at the federal Supreme Court against the verdict.

Sarah Balabagan, a teenage housemaid killed her employer, Almas Mohammed Al Baloushi, a 76-year-old UAE national in July 1994 after he allegedly raped her at knife-point. She allegedly stabbed her 34 times till he was dead. The judge Al Titwani, in his remarks about the verdict, said, "After studying the case thoroughly and taking all evidence into consideration, the court unanimously ruled that in line with the Islamic Shariah, the defendant should be given the capital punishment for the premeditated murder of her employer."

Sheikh Ahmed Al Titwani also pointed out to the fact that the defendant evidently stabbed the victim 34 times, which shows that she planned the murder.

The news of Balabagan's death sentence brought mixed reaction among the UAE residents. The news came as a shock to the local members of the Philippine community, especially to the close relatives of the defendant. Philippine Ambassador to the UAE, Roy V. Senecres said, "I am shocked at the decision. We will file an appeal. If justice still eludes judicial resources, we will seek clemency from President His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan."

In Manila, President Fidel Ramos of the Philippines said that he would personally appeal to H H Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan to save Sarah. "I shall not hesitate to bring this case to the personal attention of the President of the UAE, if the decision of the lower court is sustained by the higher court," he said a day after the verdict.

On the other hand, the public prosecutor and the Al Baloushi family expressed their satisfaction with the sentence. "Justice has finally been served and she

The Middle East Newsletter

Saifur Rahman writes from Dubai

(Balabagan) got the punishment she deserves for killing an elderly man," said Faraj Al Baloushi, the son of the deceased.

The death sentence itself has raised a debate among the local residents. It has become a matter of mass discussion among the people. While some claims that the verdict was an extreme one and has gone against justice as Balabagan did what she had to do to protect herself and her honour, the others argue that one cannot stab an elderly person 34 times to defend herself. Stabbing someone several times proves that she was not defending herself, she took revenge, thus taking the law in her hand.

More than 60,000 Philippine nationals are currently employed in different government and private organisations in the UAE. Besides them, a huge number of Filipino ladies are working as housemaids throughout the country.

Dubai's Gold Import Surges

Gold imports to Dubai is expected to rise much higher compared to the last year, this was predicted by the World Gold Council (WGC).

A WGC statement has disclosed that increasing demand in the traditional markets of Iran, India and Pakistan has contributed to the increasing inflow into Dubai, thereby reinforcing Dubai's role as a major supplier of gold to this region.

Dubai imported 26.33 tonnes of gold in July this year, representing over 32 per cent increase compared to 1981 tonnes of the same month in 1994, it said. During the first seven months of 1995, Dubai imported 189.81 tonnes of gold compared to 146.81 tonnes in 1994. This shows an increased of 29.2 per cent.

One of the reasons of this sudden surge in demand for gold in the Indian subcontinent is the liberalisation of economy and relaxation of customs duty for gold in these countries. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh has liberalised its tax structure and baggage rule in the early 90s which provoked the homebound citizens of these countries to buy ornaments in a much larger quantity than before.

Besides, the rise in buying capacity among the expanding upper middle class population of this region helped the surge in demand for gold.

According to a report in Gulf News, gold dealers in Dubai has observed that India, the largest gold market in the world requires 1.5 tonnes of gold and 10 tonnes

of silver a day. India has vastly liberalised its bullion policy in the last two years.

Call to Establish Bangladesh Trade Centre in Dubai

Many Bangladeshi residents and businessmen in Dubai feel the need of a trade centre in Dubai which can operate as the regional information and display centre for Bangladeshi goods. This can help the businessmen of the UAE to import goods from Bangladesh.

"Sometimes people want to know about certain products they need to buy and approach us. But we don't have access to these information or anything ready to show them," says Mesbahuddin Milky, a Bangladeshi community leader in Dubai. "We need a trade centre in Dubai where Bangladeshi products will be on display and be open for sale plus an office here people can strike business deals. The regular sales here will be enough to cover the running cost," he added.

There is a tremendous demand for jute and jute-related goods, garment items, zamdani and Tangail saree, leather goods, handicraft items, cane and wooden furniture etc. But the lack of information, communication and initiative barred the Bangladeshi products to come to Dubai in bulk quantity.

Besides a trade centre will definitely help to draw foreign investment from the Arab countries by creating awareness among the local businessmen in the UAE about the facilities offered by the Government of Bangladesh in this regard.

A commercial attache has been appointed at the Bangladesh Embassy in Abu Dhabi long back, but the requirement of such a post lies in Dubai, the business centre of the Middle East. India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka has opened their trade centres in Dubai long ago.

Dubai has gradually developed into a regional business and trade centre of the Middle East. Most of the diplomatic missions of various countries normally have a branch in Dubai to coordinate their works and extend their services to their fellow citizens in the form of a consulate or a bureau.

The Bangladeshi community in the UAE is one of the largest communities in the UAE. More than 1.25.000 Bangladeshi nationals are currently working in the UAE

and most of them are located in the Northern Emirates of which Dubai is considered as a centre. Bangladesh Consulate coordinates their services from Dubai and extends their them to the residents of Northern Emirates which includes Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, Ras Al Khaimah and Fujairah.

OPINION

Question Paper Leakage : Press Report and VC's Rejoinder

Dr A K Monaw-war Uddin Ahmed

I am shocked to read the report carried in The Daily Star on September 17 and the rejoinder by the Vice-Chancellor of the Dhaka University on September 18. The report stated: "Dhaka University first year Honours 'Kha' unit admission test held on April 21 last was declared 'null and void' by six-member Probe Committee after allegations that the question papers for the said examinations had been leaked. The University authorities had to rearrange the test on May 2." It further said: "Asked why action was not taken against the people involved, Prof Emajuddin said that to take action against any teacher of the university, one was required to produce 'hard evidence' which, in this case, was not possible to obtain."

In a rejoinder to the press report the Public Relations Officer of the University commented: "In fact, what the Vice-Chancellor said was that, reportedly, some teachers of the university are involved with some coaching centres in the city and some coaching centres were alleged to have been involved in the leakage of the question papers."

The report and the subsequent rejoinder would surely leave an impression that some teachers were involved in the leakage of question papers through coaching centres. As a teacher of Dhaka University said: "I am rather curious to know why the Vice-Chancellor of Dhaka University has expressed himself to the press regarding a matter that many have already been forgotten. I would like to mention that I was personally present in the meeting where the Probe Committee findings were discussed and decision to conduct a fresh admission test taken. The learned Probe Committee conducted an investigation within only a few days. This was a preliminary investigation on a serious matter like leakage of question papers."

It is well-known that investigation on such a matter would take many months to collect hard evidence even when it is conducted by a professionally trained person

of the police department or by any specialised agency. The Probe Committee headed by the Pro-VC and comprising of some senior professors of Dhaka University, however competent in academic matters, cannot be expected to be able to collect hard evidence in a very short period of time. It was a pressing situation and the Probe Committee came across such evidences which convinced them that the question paper was leaked out and, therefore, a fresh test should be conducted. The Probe Committee could not establish anything beyond this.

In order to be able to collect hard evidence, much longer time and further investigations would be required by any committee as such. Collection of hard evidences is a time-consuming process and, of course, a professional matter. There are different professional agencies in the country for such purposes. As far as my knowledge is concerned, the Vice-Chancellor did not pursue the matter. His Probe Committee did not do any further work on this or possibly it was not within its terms of reference. Verbally, the VC mentioned that some professional agencies were requested to conduct such investigations. This may or may not be true.

But my main concern is this that if the VC was earnest in his purpose, he would have constituted a committee by the Syndicate to make further investigations into the matter and collected hard evidences. Alternatively he would have formally made an FIR with the local police station. How can, therefore, any professional agency take up such a criminal matter for investigation unless the VC or the Registrar makes a formal complaint? To the best of my knowledge the VC did not undertake any such step in the last five months. Naturally, people like us who care about this University, would also be deeply concerned to see the press report and rejoinder of the VC after five months of the incident.

In this context, I would like to add a few more points. There is a general belief among many, within and outside the university, that the 1973 Dhaka University Order is too liberal to impose discipline and bring order on the campus. However, this is not at all correct. The Dhaka University Order 1973, Dhaka University Ordinance and Regulations 1986 are sufficiently comprehensive for running the institution efficiently and productively. This is because the 1973 Order and 1986 Ordinances and Regulations have clearly provided measures to handle any crime or offence done by any employee or teacher of the university.

According to the statutory provisions, the VC of the university can constitute an enquiry committee through the syndicate to collect evidences on the leakage of the question paper. The report of the enquiry committee can be submitted in the form of a charge sheet before a tribunal constituted by the Syndicate. The tribunal will consist of one member of the Syndicate, one member of the Senate and one nominee of the accused person. The accused shall not only have the right to cross-examine the prosecution witnesses but can also bring defence witnesses.

There are enough effective, adequate and judicious provisions in the Dhaka University Order, Ordinances and Regulations to bring the persons associated with leakage of question papers to task. But the VC has miserably failed to perform his statutory duties in this regard. As a starting point it does not appear to be an impossible task to prepare a list of teachers or question-setters involved with the coaching centres. Was this done at all? There is still time and the VC can undertake the necessary steps in this regard. Merely a press statement or a rejoinder does not serve the real purpose.

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