

Turn This into Opportunity

Now that the constitutionally obligatory but unrepresentative election is over, no time must be lost for a national reconciliation. Begum Zia sounded conciliatory but stopped short of making things clear enough for the opposition political parties to abandon the confrontational course. Time is not quite on her side after the highly controversial polls. So the opposition is bent on taking as much wind out of her sail as is possible. The three major opposition parties have already made their intention clear by announcing a three-day non-cooperation programme.

Observers and political analysts have started questioning the legitimacy of the government to be formed now. Without going into the merit of that controversy we can see that the next government is going to be weak for obvious reasons. A government coming through a non-participatory and controversial election cannot be expected to do anything better. It will have to deal with a more determined and purposeful combined opposition from a position of vulnerability unlike its position of strength during the last five years.

In case of intransigence on the part of both government and the opposition sides only a worse scenario is expected to unfold. That is not going to be confined just to the political arena, but will irresistibly take over the social and economic sectors as well. Already the cost of the confrontational politics has been roughly estimated to be one billion dollars. This cost might go up by leaps and bounds. This election, therefore, should force all sides — particularly the ruling party — to take a fresh stock of their politics vis-a-vis the country's interests.

We disagree with those people who hold that everything is lost for the country. What we think is that both parties must now sit together without delay to derive the maximum benefit from a very bad election. This can be done if the ruling party evaluates the results of the election for what these are worth. Talks should focus now on how a fresh election can be held with a guarantee for the full participation of all political parties. Make a constitutional provision for that as early as possible and you have a meeting point. The country surely can find a way out of the prolonged political impasse.

On Shoe-strings

The Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry has given its recipe for containing inflation. It prefers a fiscal approach to a monetarist one. What the MCC&I is advocating is quite simple: They want the budget deficit reduced so as to obviate the necessity for continuing with the credit squeeze in the private sector which is forcing the investment down.

Lending rates are higher following the raising of interest rates. This would have been a justifiable course for the government to take if it had abided by the financial discipline itself through less borrowing from the banking system. So, basically it is the government's own expenditure control that needs to be regarded as key to the containment of inflation. This is not to minimise the importance of loan recovery from the private sector though.

We would like to see a mechanism in place for an effective monitoring of the public expenditure pattern during the remaining four months of the 1995-96 fiscal year. The election-staging expenses were huge, even though expenditure under the 'campaign' head was obviously less than it would have been had all the political parties participated in the polls. But then all this will add to the subsequent expenditure from the national exchequer, if and when, as the present objective conditions presage, there is a fresh general election in the country. This reinforces the argument for belt-tightening in the government and the public sector corporations.

Avoidable imports ought to be dispensed with as exports are increased to strike a balance in trade. In the light of the extraordinary situation we find ourselves in, we might consider the desirability of some contingency fiscal measures to incentivise supply, productivity and export.

Granted, the rate of inflation is stubbornly hovering rather close to the double-digit figure but it is still far from being scary. If we do not lose our cool or beat about the bush, the price pressure can be tided over by appropriate measures devised through consultation between the Finance Ministry and the chamber leaders.

Social Clauses

The world trade predicament of the developing countries seems far from over, even after the Uruguay Round of trade liberalisation. They are facing a form of veiled protectionism through the rich countries' insistence on a set of standards pertaining to forced or child labour, environmental input, minimum wages, and the right to organise trade unions.

Since exports originating in the developing countries have a competitive edge over those of the industrial world by virtue of their low labour costs the latter are imposing conditions under the guise of social clauses upon the former under-cutting their advantages.

Their stances have the appearance of being quite principled but when pushed too far these take on the character of protectionist barrier. The conditions are sought to be incorporated in the multilateral trade agreements, a trend which has been criticised by Carl Greenidge, acting Secretary General of the 70-nation African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) group in a meet at the EU headquarters in Brussels recently. The South East Asian countries have been the target of criticism by the rich countries. The saving grace, however, is that the European Commission has left it to the WTO to begin a study on the issue. It is time the developing countries woke up to the new challenge.

Election Commission Must Not Validate the Results

Nowhere is it written in the constitution that the Election Commission has to guarantee the continuity of the government or act as its guardian.

WAS the so-called election held on 15 February free and fair? Did it meet the requirements of the law? The nation would demand a straight-forward answer from the Chief Election Commissioner. He owes it to the nation. He must not evade his responsibility, as he has often done, by equivocation and sophistry. If his honest answer is that it was neither free nor fair then he is duty-bound to reject the results. He would be guilty of serious dereliction of duty if he validates the results of flawed elections in the face of irrefutable evidence that widespread rigging took place.

The Chief Election Commissioner has been very pre-occupied with the task of upholding the constitution. He seems to forget that his main, and indeed only, responsibility is to hold elections. It is also his responsibility to ensure that the elections are free and fair. He certainly holds an office under the constitution but he is not the exclusive guardian of the constitution. Nowhere is it written in the constitution that the Election Commission has to guarantee the continuity of the government or act as its guardian. The Election Commission's sole task is to hold elections which are free, fair and lawful. In fulfilling this specific responsibility,

the constitution directs that the Election Commission shall be independent in the exercise of its functions and subject only to its constitution and any other law. The point about independence is obviously most important because grave doubts have arisen in the mind of the people about the independence of the Election Commission. The manner in which it postponed the date of the by-elections to the seats vacated by the opposition MPs to give rise to doubts in public mind about how independent the EC has been from government influence. Whatever may be the arguments advanced by Mr. Justice Sadeque, the postponement was designed to, or ended up prolonging the life of the BNP government. His action may once again act as the instrument of a government which is determined to hang on to office on the strength of an election which was flawed from beginning to end? Mr. Justice Sadeque has a choice. He can declare that the elections failed to meet the minimum acceptable standards under the law. Or he can, of course, do what he has been doing so far by validating results which are fatally flawed. In doing so

he will go down in history as a key collaborator in the process of validating a flawed election whose credibility, and as such, acceptability is almost next to zero.

Most jurists I have talked to have said that the Chief Election Commissioner and other Commissioners are not above the law. It cannot be as if they are not accountable to anyone. If they are found to be flouting the law the matter

legality FEMA's interim report released yesterday noted that. The term free and fair is not applicable to this election. Numerous irregularities were noted, most importantly, the absence of polling officials and polling agents in many centres, and the failure to apply indelible ink which enabled some voters to cast ballots more than once which was reflected in discrepancies between the number of

paper and stuffed the ballot boxes. Can he, in all honesty, treat the results of this fraudulent exercise as legally valid? I am told that the Election Commission has ordered fresh polls in 84 seats. Do they want the nation to believe that in the rest of the constituencies the necessary legal safeguards against fraud and rigging operated? The EC reportedly trying to examine only those cases where the number of votes exceed all reasonable limit. Is this either a sensible or legally tenable way to determine the legal validity of polls? Some BNP candidates may have been prudent in stuffing the boxes with false votes while others were too greedy.

Let us hear what the lawyers have to say in the matter. Ten leading lawyers, including some eminent legal personalities, issued a joint statement on February 17 calling for cancellation of the elections. They said, "If the Election Commission remains true to its oath it cannot resort to fraud in the name of election that did not reflect the will of the people." They pointed out that the Commission should know better than any one else that there was no election in fact

or in law and that there had been a total failure of the electoral process from whatever angle one might look at it. "As such the election failed to give any credibility to the Commission itself or any kind of legitimacy to any government."

The central issue before the nation is the sad conclusion that the party in power cannot conduct any election that can be called free and fair. Ironically, the failed attempt by the BNP to stage a fraudulent election on 15 February only proved the opposition's contention. Bangladesh is not yet ready to hold elections as it is done in the UK or France or the USA. We need to establish the political culture of free and fair election. We must build up the tradition of rigging-free polling. We must ensure that men and women of integrity and character are placed in the Election Commission to conduct the election according to the law. They must not be seen as mere pliable instruments of the ruling party.

The present Chief Election Commissioner's role has not produced this type of public confidence which is vital for that post. Let us hope that at this critical juncture of the nation he will rise to the occasion and cancel the entire exercise held on 15 February as invalid.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah A M S Kibria



can be referred to the Supreme Judicial Council for its consideration.

Why am I urging upon the Chief Election Commissioner and his colleagues to refrain from legalizing a process which failed to meet the requirements of law? It is because the evidence is so strong. Reports from FEMA confirm that rigging on a massive scale has robbed the process of any semblance of

voters present and the declared results.

In a very large number of cases the presiding officers and polling officers were just not there. Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that in a particular constituency these officers may have been present, say, in fifty per cent of the centres. BNP musclemen took possession of the other fifty per cent of centres and put the seal on the ballot

Military's New Man on the Unofficial Troika

Tariq Butt writes from Islamabad

The military has played a major political role in Pakistan since independence, either ruling directly or influencing civilian governments. In view of this speculation has been rife about the appointment of a new army chief.

A change of army chief always makes big news in Pakistan, where the military has ruled for 23 of the years since independence in 1947.

The holder of the post is a pivot in the power structure and his appointment is often considered a key to a civilian government's stability.

The army chief is a member of the informal ruling troika — together with the President and Prime Minister — which makes all important national decisions, local and international.

Such a trio, says Husain Naqi, a noted columnist, "can be nothing else but a supra-constitutional aberration. Such a body, if in existence in any form, negates democratic norms and can only promote darchy."

So there was intense speculation before General Jehangir Karamat was named Chief of Army Staff in mid-January in succession to the retiring General Abdul Waheed.

The potential importance of the post is clear from his predecessors' records:

• General Ziaul Haq (army chief from 1977 until he was killed in an air crash in 1988) was hand-picked by President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto — father of current Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto —

but turned out to be a coup-maker and Bhutto's hanger-on. • General Aslam Beg (1988-91) forced the dismissal of the first Benazir government.

• General Asif Nawaz (1991-93) was the architect of Benazir Bhutto's 'long march' on Islamabad against the Nawaz Sharif Government.

• General Abdul Waheed (1993-96) presided over the removal of 10 leading civilian office-holders including the President, the Prime Minister and all four provincial governors and chief ministers. The 1993 election he helped bring about brought Benazir Bhutto back to power.

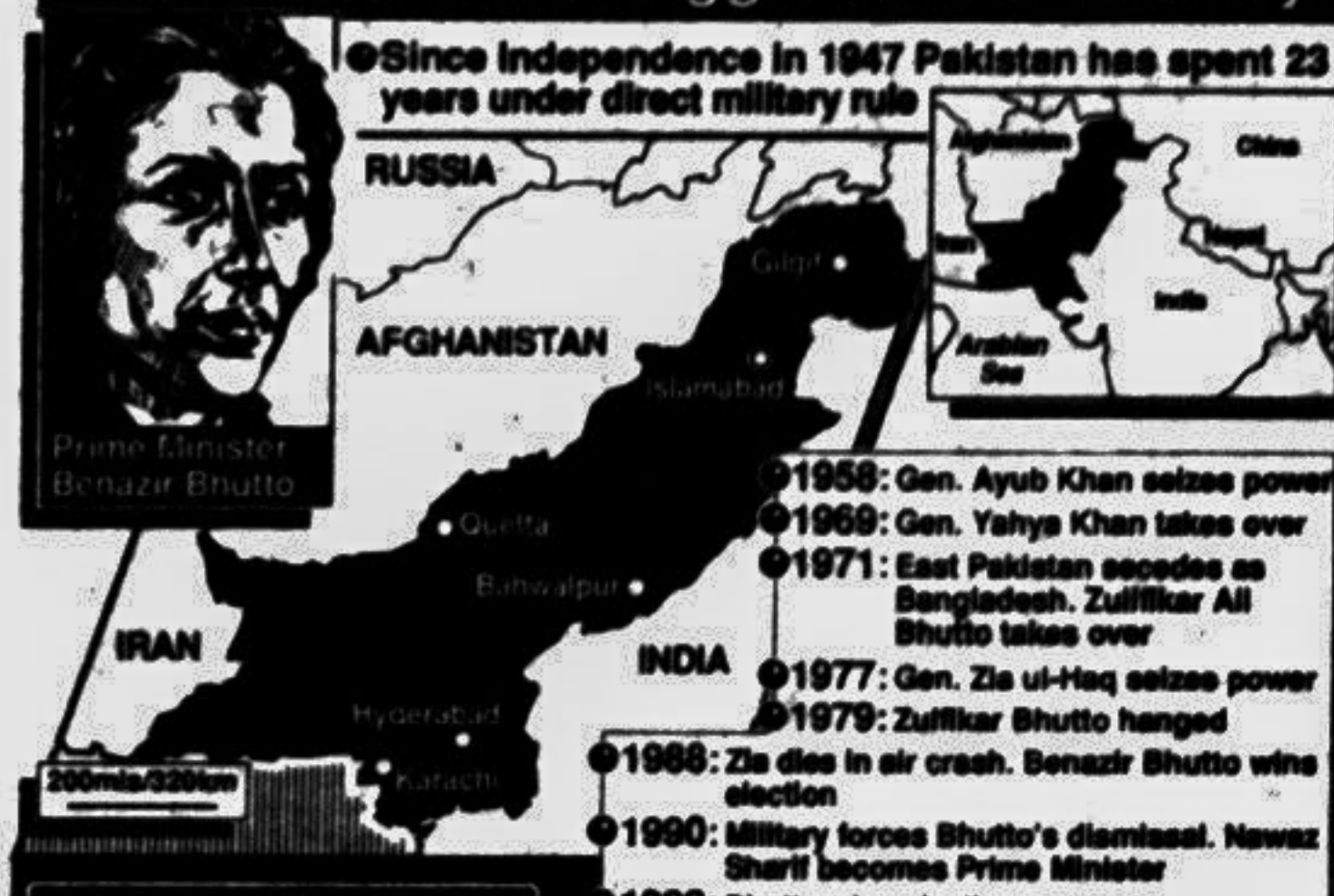
Since the return of democracy in 1985 after an eight-year break, all three civilian governments have been sent packing when the Chief of Staff decided they had to go.

All politicians — in opposition as well as in government — clearly have an interest in keeping on friendly terms with the Chief of Staff.

That is why opposition leader Sharif became edgy when it looked as though Bhutto was considering keeping Waheed for another year. He considered Waheed pro-Bhutto and anti-opposition.

"If the government wants to take more work from General Waheed," he said openly

Pakistan: the struggle for democracy



before Karamat was named. "It should give him some assignment after his retirement."

In the event, Waheed refused an extension and retired on cue. Sharif is happier with

Karamat who, he says, "deserves the office due to his professional capability, competence and merit."

Indeed, the soft-spoken, apparently non-political Karamat, who was chosen above four more senior generals, has won across-the-board support.

He has plenty of military matters to occupy him, starting with the courts martial of four officers for an attempted coup in September 1995. The would-be coup makers were reportedly motivated by a desire to replace democratic civilian government with a regime based on Islamic principles.

Defence analyst Mushahid Hussain points out that Karamat takes office at a time when the armed forces relationship with the United States military — which for a little over 40 years has been central to its worldview, training and equipment — is undergoing major change. "The days when the Pakistan Army was the Pentagon's favourite in south Asia are gone."

However complex the military issues facing the new man, it will be hard to steer completely clear of politics.

"Politicians are intent on stoking the fires of confrontation," said in an editorial commentary in the daily newspaper Frontier Post. "Things in the days ahead

might hot up to an extent where some restraining action might be required."

If that proved necessary, counselled the paper, intervention should be from the President not the Chief of Staff. "Surely, with someone like General Karamat in the saddle, we know it wouldn't happen."

Another newspaper, The Nation, also appealed to the army to turn a deaf ear to the voices of people such as former air force chief Asghar Khan, now a politician, who has urged Karamat to do what Waheed had 'failed' to do and bring about a change in the system of government.

Former Chief of Staff Aslam Beg has also been arguing for a constitutional role for the armed forces.

The Nation's view was that military interference is guaranteed to cause even greater problems than those sought to be resolved through such a course. The paper described advocates of interventionism as "adventurers hawking their shoddy wares which, thankfully, have yet to find a buyer in Pakistan's changed circumstances since democracy, with all its warts and blemishes, was restored."

— GEMINI NEWS
TARIQ BUTT is chief reporter of 'The News', Islamabad.

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.

A prayer to God

Sir, Although most of us do not understand politics as it appears to be a highly technical subject, but all of us do understand that the country is passing through a very difficult and critical period due to political reasons. People of Bangladesh have been divided over a political issue which has created a tension and an uneasy environment all over the country. The citizens are quarrelling among themselves and even started killing, each other and destroying public and personal property without thinking of the effect it would leave on the whole nation. We feel ashamed when BBC and other foreign news media telecast or broadcast the news and interview of our political leaders who accuse each other. We fervently hoped that good sense would prevail and the political leaders would somehow settle the issue to end the crisis between themselves, and they would be able to stop the division amongst ourselves.

The holy month of Ramadan has almost passed away without teaching us any lesson of tolerance and self-restraint. Muslims could not fast and pray in peace, could not earn enough which they usually do and which helps them observe and enjoy Eid, the biggest religious festival of our country. We are all sad and helpless.

But what could we do except imploring the politicians of our country to settle the issue between themselves to spare the citizens of the misery. What can we do now except praying to Allah to save us from this unhappy situation and process of self-destruction? Let us all pray to

Allah for the early solution of the problem before it deteriorates further and slips out of the hand of the politicians. We do not want a Bangladeshi hating and killing a Bangladeshi, our own brothers and sisters. We do not want our beloved country going backward. We want peace, prosperity and a permanent solution of our political problems. So may Allah bless us all and help us to survive.

Munira Khan
Green Road, Dhaka

A classic photograph

Sir, In the recently held Benson & Hedges cricket tournament in Australia we saw the advertisements of photographs of 'The Captain's Knock', cricket bats signed by Aussie captains and the David Boon bat. As far as information goes everything was sold out at quite high prices.

I am, however, not talking about cricket here directly but referring to a photograph in your paper of 13-2-96 on the last page showing two presidential officers in the water. This photograph is a graphic story of today's Bangladeshi political scenario and I think it should be captioned 'A tale of two sides'. It should be beautifully framed and I am sure hundreds of it will be sold.

It tells a great story: The rippling waterbody in between the two sides is Bangladesh and the empty side is the government whilst the side closest to the opposition. The officers with one desperately moving to the government's side, the other trying to placate the teenagers to allow him to get out of troubled waters, couldn't be closer to today's truth. The

peace-loving citizens of this country are caught in exactly such a quagmire... whether to go?

The person moving away is heading towards deeper waters and may have to swim (he may get into serious problems if he can't swim) to an empty side with no one to offer protection and the one trying to come out the other way may finally manage to do so, only to find that he is walking home without any clothes on!

The analysis above may have some humour to it but a deeper analysis would show that the meaning underlying the humour is after all not at all humorous, rather it depicts the stark reality of the sorry state that the people have been forced into due to the shallow politics having the upperhand.

But for how long? The rippling waterbody is bound to turn into turbulent waters, take on waves and overflow, to wipe both sides out.

Syed Tasleem Hussain
Uttara, Dhaka

Biman's customer service

Sir, Recently, I was a victim of the so-called service of the Bangladesh Biman, the country's national airlines. I purchased a Dhaka-Saidpur ticket of flight No 491 of 12th February '96 bearing No 9971 0508-3987 (12WLK) from Biman's head office. In the ticket the flight time was clearly mentioned as 11:15 hours, and the status was "OK". Unfortunately, when I reached the airport it was informed by the desk people that the flight would leave Dhaka at 14:15 hours.

When I asked them, the reason for delay and the cause for not notifying the passengers earlier, no body could say anything. I had an urgent and important programme in Dinaipur. Had I been informed earlier I could have arranged for the alternative. I returned back to residence and went again to the airport at 13:15 hours causing harm to both my time and money.

Now as passengers should

we not expect an explanation from a service providing organisation like Biman? Or should we be complacent to say that 'this is why Biman is in a nosediving situation and losing its prestige and credibility day by day etc'?

Kazi Badrudduza
Iqbal Road, Dhaka

Attire discrimination

Sir, In view of paying respect to holy Ramadan, lady newscasters appear on the TV screen, having their heads and shoulders well covered with sarees or 'ornas'.

But I do not understand why not such dresses like 'sherwani', 'panjabi' or at least 'tupi' for male newscasters, are seen to demonstrate the same. They come as usually suited booted.

Ramadan should never advocate such gender discrimination in attire.

Nasiruddin Ahmed
Dhaka City College, Dhaka

"Dhakaites" — victims of pollution

Sir, There was a write-up on "Smoke and noise pollution in city" by your columnist ASM Nurunnabi (6th Jan '96), which was very timely. I am appreciative of the concern as expressed by Mr Nurunnabi and simultaneously by the BRTA, a little late though.

My purpose of writing this letter on the 'smoke and noise pollution' in Dhaka city is to stress the importance and impress upon the authorities that it's really high time that they take care of our health and take drastic actions before it's too late! As it appears, none of the agencies concerned is realising the gravity of the situation and endeavouring to improve the degraded environment. It's not only the 'noise-creating industries' that are posing threat to our health and environment in addition to the oddest smoke pollution, but the most harmful menace is the obnoxious sounds (into

lerable by the eardrums) created by the electric horns/whistles of the buses and trucks and excessive honking by the private cars and autorickshaws. These must be totally banned or curbed drastically to save us from heartaches and other complications.

Interestingly, I saw a wall-sign over the Police Hospital at Rajarbagh (in Bengali) which reads like 'the poisonous smoke that's emitted by the vehicles can be dangerous to your lungs which can even develop cancer! I want to ask: who is permitting and letting these un-road-worthy vehicles which are responsible for emission of poisonous gas like carbon monoxide ply on the roads? As far as I know the Motor Vehicles Act doesn't permit such defective vehicles on the road.

I want to urge upon the authorities to immediately ban and withdraw all vehicles emitting carbon monoxide and put a total ban on the import of 2-stroke engine-vehicles which are mostly the responsible ones for the worst type of pollution.

As I observe most of the three-wheelers emit black smoke combining carbon monoxide, lead and sulphur and blanket the whole atmosphere for 24 hours, making breathing very difficult. I have a feeling that no one checks the quality of the engines in the vehicles when imported from abroad! No less dangerous is the horrendous, noisy sounds of the buses and some private cars!

If honking cannot be banned totally (as done in many countries) it must be curbed by putting (making compulsory) governors on the buses and trucks and issuing strictures on the private cars. Too harsh and abnormal honks must be declared banned. And those failing to observe the strictures must have their renewals withheld. Don't the authorities concerned owe responsibility for the health, safety and security of public life?

A F Rahman
77 Motijheel C/A, Dhaka

From rubbish with leaves

Sir, The superpower Russia's move to rehabilitate her 500,000 beggars/homeless in Moscow will be inspiring the destitutes across the world.

Universally true now, in contrast to slavery in all periods of history, the current trend of establishing freedom is a due respect to the UN Human Rights Declaration, which is leading the mankind out of the torment of injustice.

As for aids recipient socialist-turned-capitalist veto-powered space-resident that survived the recent disintegration of her union following termination of the Cold War, this sweeping street level steps should be a sparkling model for rest of the world.

The plan to transform her down-and-outs in Moscow into self-supportive productive workforce toward permanent solution to the tragic problem cannot be a better example of a large-scale humanitarian gesture invigorating all other processes of helping the hapless on earth.

Having taken such a humane approach to this everlasting civic disgrace has Russian democratic government opened up possible avenues to happier livelihood for every body regardless of discriminating social statuses.

Like all methods applied everywhere in the hope of mitigating the anguish of the distressed humanity, prioritised pragmatic government as well as non-government initiatives to provide her citizens with the basic needs will prove a boon to the state's economic boost consequent upon their multifarious participations in the developmental works.

M Rahman
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