

A True National Priority

The floods in the northern districts are descending on the southern and more populous areas, engulfing every day so the thousands of square kilometres of land. The waters are but rushing to the Bay, and their routes lie — for neither good nor bad and entirely for geomorphological reasons — through the Bengal basin or the whole of Bangladesh. Mismanagement together with a stupendous lack of management of any kind have contributed mightily to making this blessing of nature — the Bangladesh of floods is the gift of three of the world's mightiest rivers — turn into a national disaster almost with an yearly regularity.

As a part of the newly flooded tracts of land, Dhaka city being the site of the densest population in the country is going to experience especially hard times. With almost one-third of its area already under water, the outlook is more and more mahallas will be enveloped by water in the next two days. Most of the city will then form a part of the vast expanse of fear some featureless waterscape of the surrounding districts.

Perhaps with due and dependable warning and adequate relief work during the deluge — yes, it is a deluge threatening to match the one in 1988 — and after it, misery and suffering can somewhat be lessened. But what would the hundreds of thousands do whose habitat — entire villages and unions as in Lohajung and Tongi bari in Munshiganj — has been lost for good to the massive erosion this flood, specially the Padma, is causing? With every square kilometre of land washed away, the flood gains new territory to devastate. If this process continues unchallenged for another few decades there will hardly be any villages and towns or cropfields and forests between the Bay and Himalayas, during the rains. And for the remaining months of the year the whole of this 150 thousand plus square kilometres patch of earth would present the view of a desert wrought by drought and human folly.

It is stranger than the strangest of fictions that Bangladesh has yet to take its water management problem — the problem of its rivers and floods and erosions — as a true national priority. It has been left to aggravate perhaps for marrow and myopic political profit.

Please unite and co-operate to make the most of the think of possibility is now showing. Whatever quarter would stand in the way of a political and technical resolution of this problem, would be pushing this state over the precipice.

Expanding EPZ

Dhaka's Export Processing Zone is destined to grow spatially. The government has taken the decision to set up a new zone at Gazipur to enhance the operational capability of the smaller of the two export processing zones in the country. It is a tell-tale sign of the increased demand for setting up export-oriented industry by the local and foreign investors in Bangladesh. A simple survey of the statistics divulged very recently in almost all the leading dailies puts one in the picture well and truly.

Both the export processing zones exceeded their targets in the last fiscal year. The growth rate in the 1995-96 fiscal year compared to the previous year is quite satisfactory particularly in the light of the highly demoralising unhealthy business environment that prevailed here owing to the prolonged political paralysis plaguing Bangladesh in the last couple of years.

Although considerably smaller than Chittagong in both size and export turnover, Dhaka Export Processing Zone which marked substantial South Korean investment in the recent years is about to expand in the expected course of its advantage in the infrastructural consideration.

Growth or establishment of an export processing zone makes huge demand on the infrastructural system of a country. From land to telecommunication facilities, an export processing zone which essentially contributes to the economic growth of a country, has a vast dominion where a state of unending efficiency and convenience has to be ensured. One reason for Dhaka's growth is its distinct infrastructural advantage vis-a-vis other regions of the country. For real flip to country's economy, the horizon of the export processing zone should be extended quickly. To effect this change, the infrastructural demand and reality in the other regions call for a scrutiny following which an action plan should be drafted to develop the prospective but unexplored "zones". Let the extension of the DEPZ be a sustained pattern in the context of the whole country.

Whose Bag?

A medley of foreign currency in huge amount has been stopped from being smuggled out of the country. The story of achievement in thwarting an apparently evil design ends there. Because the force that made the collection of currencies worth Taka three crore move in a crew bag towards the Dhaka-Dubai-London flight of Bangladesh Biman is yet to be tracked.

All the crew of the aircraft were interrogated immediately after the detection on the stroke of Wednesday midnight but the possibility of any revelation that could have led to the discovery of the hand behind the mysterious move vanished as all of them denied responsibility. If it did not belong to any of the crew then, at some point of the whole system dealing with the process of loading, there must be some fissure through which acts of criminal intent like this can creep in.

It could be either an instance of callousness or compliance with a carefully and craftily charted plan, that no sticker bearing the name of the owner was there on the bag. A simple and mandatory system which, if religiously observed, can work as an automatic defence against similar attempts and the subsequent embarrassment and possibility of stigma as suffered by the whole crew of the aircraft. No matter how vehemently and convincingly they cleared themselves from the list of suspects on that night, suspicion and the accompanying stigma will remain until the real culprits are nabbed. Crime detection bears no meaning on the whole act of vigilance unless the criminals are brought to book.

Zia International Airport has of late been a permanent stage for all sorts of undesirable activities ranging from corruption to callousness. Something should be done immediately to reverse the trend.

Peasants and Middlemen in Development

The "entrepreneurship" in rural areas should be made more competitive so that middlemen can barely suck farmers' blood.

MIDDLEMEN are usually seen as exploiters and unproductive economic agents who tend to exploit peasants through monopoly/oligopoly pricing and usury. Especially in the realm of agricultural products and input marketing in developing countries, middlemen become the victims of attacks from policy makers, politicians and academicians. The maze of government interventions that are in evidence in developing countries to agriculture owe to a larger extent the exploitative role of those economic agents in the marketing chain.

Professor Yuljro Hayami, the world famous agricultural economist, seems to tell us a different story about middlemen and efficiency drawing upon his field level experience in rural villages and rural towns in Indonesia where trading and processing of farm products are dominated by active participation and entrepreneurship of the peasant population. In reality, many local traders and manufacturers are rooted in village communities. They are organized efficiently through informal contracts and tacit agreements. The system works effectively in economizing the use of scarce capital and management input while making intensive use of local inputs, especially labour, which has a low opportunity cost. Profes-

sor Hayami noted that entry to and exit from the process is very much open and intensely competitive, so much so that manipulation of prices by traders becomes a difficult job. "Not only is the marketing system an effective support for farm production but itself generates significant amounts of employment and income in the rural sector."

How is that efficiency-friendly marketing system works? A fleet of self-employed informal marketing agents appear to collect small marketable surpluses from peasants and deliver them to specialized large traders for transshipment. These tiny traders, the so-called "village collectors" are themselves small farmers and agricultural labourers (along with family members) while the larger ones are based either in the town or in the village. In between them there are "inter-village collectors" whose prime function is to assemble the quantities from the village collectors and tranship them to distant markets. These inter-village collectors belong to the upper peasantry typically holding farm lands from 2 to 10 hectares, a part of which they themselves cultivate and the rest is rented out. Often an in-

ter-village collector develops an informal long-term contract relation with several village collectors to advance them trade credits for assured delivery of collected farm products. This trade-credit interlinkage is more common and more tightly structured in the marketing of perishable commodities such as vegetables for

the empirical evidence, argues that a serious loss in private and social efficiency might emanate if government steps into the market in the name of controls on prices and profits. Advent of a more modernised and capital intensive method might also inject inefficiency and also inequity through displacing labour. Policy efforts

concentrate policy efforts only at constructing roads, highways, telephone networks. More importantly, development of institutions that cater to the needs of market information, such as grading, crop forecasting etc can contribute a lot in the reduction of risks and transaction costs.

The role of the government should also lie in investment in agricultural research and extension geared for increased crop yield and marketable surplus. An intensive search for new profitable cropping systems is vitally important for increasing rural income and employment opportunities in both farm production and marketing activities. Similarly, a wide range of government assistance for industrial research and extension would also reduce the cost of processing and develop new preferable products. By and large, Professor Hayami argues for government interventions in terms of the development of infrastructural and research and extension facilities but not in terms of regulating prices and profits. The "entrepreneurship" in rural areas should be made more competitive so that middlemen can barely suck farmers' blood.

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



which farm-level collection and bulk shipment to distant urban markets must be closely coordinated; in the case of vegetables this interlinkage contract is extended further from village collectors to farm products. No explicit or implicit interest is found to be charged in the process, rather they "make various efforts to reduce the credit costs such as exploitation of cost difference between the large lot purchase and farmer's small lot purchase of fertilizer and chemicals for credit in kind."

in this direction should be delayed until overall economic development reaches a stage at which the real wage rate begins to rise sharply and, thereby, devices that some labour become socially beneficial. The role of the government lies in reducing the transportation cost through investment in roads and highways. Such investments are also warranted in reducing trade risks and transaction costs and thus promoting new entry and competition in marketing. However, it would be naive to

Minorities : Between the Devil and the Deep Sea

by Sultana Nahar

"BISMILLAHIR RAHMANIR RAHIM" was incorporated through the fifth amendment of the constitution during the regime of General Zia. General Ershad went a step further and brought the eighth amendment to make Islam the State religion. Both Generals made mockery of democratic process and brought such changes in the constitution by sheer strength of brutal majority in the Parliament purely on political consideration. None of them cared for people's approval for such fundamental changes by way of holding a referendum on the issue or by sending the draft amendments to the Select Committee of the Parliament for soliciting public opinion.

However, the amendments made the minorities certified second class citizens, and dealt a fatal blow to the concept of secular civil society.

A fundamentalist party and few other rightist parties were overtly pleased at such constitutional machinations of the Generals. The Generals received much accolade from a section of the people and organisations. However, our common people seem to be more civil, secular and democratic. They discarded the fundamentalist and other parties which amended the constitution to exploit the religious sentiment of the people for political expediency in June 12 election. A very high percentage of turnout of voters at the polling centres is a testimony to the efficiency and impartiality of the Caretaker

The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine election which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

(Article 21, Universal Declaration of Human Rights)

Government and the Election Commission in holding this parliamentary election. Women in large number participated in the election almost in a festive mood. The most outstanding feature of June 12 election was, barring a few polling centres, the presence of minority voters without any apprehension of violence. It is a good sign for our nascent democracy. Some sporadic incidents of violence at few places did not mar the overall peaceful atmosphere and were inconsequential having no discernible impact on the election result.

Unfortunately, post election situation in some areas where minority voters significantly constitute a comparative political force has posed threat to their life and property. If the minority voters feel that a particular party symbolises their hopes and aspirations they have all the civil and democratic right to vote for the party with that particular symbol. It is a travesty of democratic right to prevent the minority, or for that matter any, voters from coming to the polling centre. Similarly it is again a denial of civil right if the minority voters are allowed to exercise their right of franchise and then are subjected to taunts and torture on the presumption of voting for a

particular party. It is not Jamaat which is intimidating and harassing the minority voters. Most of the parties have resorted to this coercive measure on the minority voters during the election. For that reason we have no moral ground to brand and despise Jamaat as the only fundamentalist political party in Bangladesh. Other officially secular and non-secular political parties of Bangladesh felt no qualms of guilt in using religion for political purpose. Both secular and non-secular parties widely used religious sermons and inscriptions on their election posters and pamphlets in the last election.

The prominent leaders of these parties all of a sudden became model followers of religion and assiduously started following religious dress code in public meetings. In a news report published in a local daily recently an eminent columnist has very deftly unmasked the pseudo-secular character of many political leaders. We have now reasons to accuse these political parties of double standard and of deceit so far as it relates to their stance on secularism. The minorities are but pawns in the chess board of political parties in Bangladesh.

We are alarmed that acts of violence on the minorities have taken place in some areas of Bangladesh after June 12

election. The minority community voters of those constituencies from where Awami League candidates got elected have become the victims of violence. In a few centres minority voters were forced by candidates of a party to stay at home. Reliable reports have it that members of the minority community of Rouzan, Rangunia, Chandanailah and Paliya of greater Chittagong district; Savar, Manikganj, Narayanganj and Sonargaon of greater Dhaka; Chandpur, Jhenidah, Chuadanga and Barisal constituencies could not muster courage to go to the polling centres.

No one expected violence during this election. But it happened. It has now become imperative and urgent to investigate into such occurrences and draw up effective measures to forestall such acts of post election vandalism in future. The Election Commission could not anticipate that the members of the minority community would be targeted for such atrocities. That was the reason Election Commission did not deploy forces in those areas. Besides, there was no ground for taking any preemptive measure as no act of post-election violence took place in all the past elections held from 1975 to 1991. Perhaps it did not happen as Awami League did not win in those elections. Some parties

during those elections successfully kept the minority voters confined to their homes on the election day. It is a national shame that minorities of Bangladesh cannot freely exercise their right of franchise. It is unfortunate that during the administration of the caretaker government and an efficient Election Commission minorities in some areas were unable to exercise their civil right.

To ensure the safety and honour of the minorities and to protect their civil right, the present government must swing into action from now onward. The EC will also have to take in hand the existing election rules and procedures for re-examination in order to bring necessary changes therein to prevent pre and post election violence which invariably victimises the minority voters. A Dhaka-based diplomat suggested a couple of changes in our election rules which sounded convincing. The EC may examine those suggestions.

Under the relevant election rules votes cast at a particular centre are counted there. As a result a candidate comes to know at which centre he has polled maximum or minimum number of votes. Thus a losing candidate finds an excuse to blame and harass the voters of that centre. This system should be discarded

The role of marketing co-operatives can be immense in a regime of market segmentation and information shortage. At that hour of need, even technical assistance and initial subsidies can be provided to encourage their spread. But in the face of competition from the private sector, experiences tend to show, these co-operatives become growingly dependent on subsidies. The projects thus were either not viable partly because co-operatives were not built on the initiatives of local people but on governments' ideological preconceptions.

More dangerous would be to make the co-operatives viable by granting monopoly rights. Such co-operatives have been "major sources of inefficiency in agricultural marketing and credit operations and of rent-seeking behaviours by vested interest-groups. Co-operatives should promote rather than constrain competition. From the observations of Hayami, it appears that the pessimism surrounding the virtues of peasants' entrepreneurship in commerce and industry does not stand up empirical tests in an underdeveloped state of the market chains, middlemen appear as "sharks" but with the growth-market integration, rising opportunities, middlemen's role should be positively recognized.

and in its place counting of votes cast at all the centres should be done at the Office of the EC of that constituency. Ballot boxes from all the centres should be collected and taken under armed escort to that offices. The seal of the boxes should be broken and the boxes opened in presence of the polling agents, then the ballot papers should be shuffled repeatedly and the ballot papers counted.

To prevent any violence or terrorism in and around any polling centre on the election day the EC during June 12 election divided the polling centres into (a) Safe (b) less vulnerable and (c) vulnerable categories. This sort of categorisation was fraught with dangers as the miscreants got chance and time to move to a safer centre to do the mischief. Therefore, in future elections, all polling centres should be treated as equally vulnerable and forces deploy accordingly.

People have welcomed the Government of Sheikh Hasina, the election commission has also done a marvellous job. Kudos also to Caretaker Government of Justice Habibur Rahman. Credit and Kudos will be endless for Sheikh Hasina and Abu Hena if they succeed in holding next Parliamentary election under a Caretaker Government in a freer and fairer way — free from pre and post-election violence of which the hopeless minorities become the prey.

The writer is Advocate, Supreme Court of Bangladesh.

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.

Congratulations

Sir, The choice of former Chief Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed as the new President has given rise to greater hopes in the ordinary people of Bangladesh. We congratulate the Prime Minister for the choice and we thank Honorable former Chief Justice for coming forward to accept the position.

The new government has so far shown great maturity in their major decision-making and we hope this good sense will prevail upon till the end of their term. The people of this country will give full support as long as they get an honest, patriotic and transparent government.

Akku Chowdhury
Banani, Dhaka

Choice of President and Task Force Report

Sir, The choice of Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed as the President for next five-year term is definitely a pleasant surprise to the nation. The new government has made many declarations which have raised the hopes and expectation of the nation very high, though almost all of these are yet to be materialised. This action of the choice of the President has definitely added credibility to the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, her Government and her party.

Justice Shahabuddin got all the praise he deserved at home and abroad for the first ever impartial election in 1991, conducted so far not only in Bangladesh but all over the subcontinent. Many of his other decisions did not get as much publicity but, nonetheless those were equally important and valuable to the nation. Among those, one should be mentioned which was forming a task force to

identify the national problems and give suggestions for the solutions. This Task Force comprised 29 committees formed by persons from within the national talents. Before the tenure of his office was over, he presented the nation with the task force report printed in four volumes.

Unfortunately, the last government did not have time to read the report let alone take any positive action towards implementation of any part of it. We would request the Prime Minister to make some time to look into the report and possibility of implementation of any relevant parts.

Nurul Bashar
Dhaka

Thanks to Justice Shahabuddin

Sir, Probably, this is the second time, after Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, that a right person is being placed to the highest position of our beloved Republic. My heartfelt thanks to Awami League for this excellent decision of choosing a neutral person — Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed. He did a wonderful job in 1991 and proved himself 'neutral' in the true sense of the term and established himself as a strong man as well. I must thank him for accepting the position.

We have few dreams to fulfil. But alas! Our politicians always stopped us from making them come true. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, with whom we had maximum expectations unfortunately failed to achieve and so all others. We are a very unfortunate nation, never had a 'complete leader' who had vision to create future. The leaders, so far we have come across, failed to be fair to the citizens. They simply could not go beyond themselves and/or their party.

Whereas, our beloved country has people of great poten-

tial, who always supported the good causes but always got cheated by their own leaders and politicians. These leaders appear very good in respecting the bloodshed by the innocent people, in words only. Soon they gain any opportunity, they rather punish the same people and get busy to build their own fortune. We also failed to find a single political leader, who respected other party's politics or leaders.

So, at this point, when we find a man like Justice Shahabuddin is being honoured and placed on the top plank — we get to feel better. I humbly suggest that the present government also should think of using the wisdom/counsel of Justice Habibur Rahman, the former Chief Adviser and the other 10 Advisers in befitting suitable forms. The government may consider to form a Council of Advisers to advise them in various development programmes and issues or even monitoring the government's important development programmes and operations.

I am highly delighted to see Justice Shahabuddin as our next President. I am confident that he shall act as a strong person as he did in 1991 or even more than that. I also expect to see Awami League starts respecting opposition party politics and politicians and so BNP joining in to lead the country to prosperity.

I sincerely hope that the political parties and their leaders would never forget that for each election we, the people, spend huge amount of money to elect and send them to Jatiya Sangsad. We expect them to work for the development of our impoverished nation only — not for just quarrelling with each other over the causes or issues having little or no relevance to the country's development.

M Ashraf Rahim
Motijheel, Dhaka

The truth

Sir, I congratulate Mr Khaleque, former Home Secretary, for telling the truth. Truth is always bitter and new members of the Jatiya Sangsad should admit that there is none among the elected members who can claim his elec-

tion expenses have been kept within the limit of Tk 3 lakh, set by the Election Commission. We should know that the truths are self-evident and need no proof.

I request all the members of Jatiya Sangsad, including the members of the Jamaat-Islami, to come out to explain his or her position regarding election expenses. Election Commission should amend its laws in keeping with the realities, instead of forcing the members to submit false election expenses.

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Why keep controversies alive?

Sir, Our people are continuously confronted with and suffering from various controversies one after another for years together. If we get rid of one controversy, another new one emerges on the surface. The people are fed up, upset and annoyed and their mental agonies know no bound.

We are afraid how and when we would be able to free ourselves from the clutches of controversies. Is it not shocking and undesirable that after a leviantan controversy over 'caretaker government' or 'no caretaker government' we are now indulged in whether we have a consensus or a coalition government?

Unfortunately the whole nation is divided into various administrative and policy-making matters. Over last 21 years we wondered about our identity whether we are 'Bengali' or 'Bangladeshi' — whether the portrait of father of the nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was displayed/hanged in government offices or not, whether we would call our national radio as Bangladesh Betar or Bangladesh Radio, whether our President, Prime Minister, Speaker and Ministers would star their addresses to the nation with the Arabic words "Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim" or with its translation in Bangla and concludes the speech saying 'Khoda Hafez' and 'Bangladesh Zindabad' or 'Joi Bangla' or 'Bangladesh Dirghajibi Houk'

and whether we would welcome the foreign guests with the words 'Khos Amged' or 'Shagatom' etc.

Similarly, we have also failed to decide whether we would raise at the UN and other international fora the question of India's commissioning of Farakka Barrage and stoppage of supply of the Ganges water to Bangladesh, India's forceful occupation of our Talpatty, its violation of international agreement that Bangladesh would get the territory of Tinbigha in exchange of Bangladeshi territory of Berubara, repatriation of stranded Pakistanis from Bangladesh, realisation of Bangladesh's rightful assets from Pakistan and so and so forth.

The points and issues mentioned above are not trifling matters. The people of our country especially the younger generation are very much confused and disturbed — mentally and psychologically because of conflicts of ideas, differences of opinion and incompatible decision of some of our political leaders and intellectuals. Our unity, patriotism, solidarity and national integrity are adversely affected. Our self-made contradictions also tarnished the prestige and image of our country abroad.

Can't we do away with the chaos and confusion arising out from the above mentioned controversies and disputes? Can't our Awami League, BNP, Jatiya Party and Jamaat-islami MPs arrive at a national consensus on the aforesaid matters in the Jatiya Sangsad for the greater interest of the nation?

We all must remember that "united we stand, divided we fall".

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Questions bug

Sir, I have gone through the article "Turn grief into Strength" written by Nadeem Qadir published in your esteemed daily on July 22, 1996. I more or less agree with what the author has expressed in his writing.

However, I have questions to ask. Nadeem Qadir has writ-

ten, "The Whole world knows who led Bangladesh to its independence" Well, is the author sure of it? Does BNP know it? What about the young people who were born after 1971? Did the author ever ask any man on the street?

Two years back in 1994, I, along with a colleague went to Cox's Bazar, Tekna area on an official tour. There we happened to come across a 12-13-year-old boy, who was a pupil of a local Madrasa. Out of curiosity my colleague asked him, "Who is the father of the nation?" To my (and my colleague's) utter surprise, the boy instantly replied, "Golam Azam." To our question "Who is Sheikh Mujib?" he gave a bizarre look!

In the same issue, I have read letter written by Nurjahan of Chittagong. She does not understand the change of the name of Radio Bangladesh to Bangladesh Betar. She also doesn't know why "Zindabad" is not acceptable ("just because it is an Urdu word"). But she does not ask, why the immortal slogan of the Liberation War "Joy Bangla" was not uttered officially since 1975? Why did the then military regime had to change the name Bangladesh Betar to Radio Bangladesh after 1975 military putsch?

Dilir Karim
Moghbarar, Dhaka

Election to vacant seats on consensus

Sir, Re-election is going to be held soon to the 16 vacant seats of the National Assembly. Of these six belong to BNP and five each to JP and AL. I suggest to fill in these seats on a consensus basis among the political parties on the following grounds: 1) election costs money and energy; 2) voters are in no mood for election so on; 3) violence may flare up and spread, causing further enmity and loss of lives and properties; 4) election results may damage government's credibility, as was the case of Magdur; and 5) desecrating Magdur may not get elected in these elections.

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