

A Courageous Act

The government has virtually withdrawn its action against teachers of badly performing schools and colleges. Let us hope that this is not a defeat for an almost good and decidedly courageous decision.

No, that is not all that is in the thing. The decision was a very good one in so far as it aimed at fixing the responsibility of the recent poor showings in the SSC and particularly the HSC exams — and making those responsible pay.

A silly oversight made such a groundbreaking decision unenforceable. The Education Minister seems to be aware of it even if as an afterthought or a hindsight.

We congratulate Education Minister Sadeque for being very candid on the ticklish point of politics vis-a-vis administration. He simply dared making AL and the government unpopular among the all-too-important segment of teachers — for doing what he felt to be good for education.

Acid Test for BR

The Bangladesh Railway is under pressure, perhaps the severest in the history of the organisation, to either reform or be discredited.

To our mind, the pressure now being exerted by the ADB on the government and the BR has been largely courted by us. Despite the plethoric media and public criticism of mismanagement in the railways and its failure to live up to its potential, not much has happened by way of vastly improved services.

Of the do's prescribed by the ADB, let's concentrate on four: Staff and asset rationalisation tariff restructuring and strengthening of marketing function.

The first two items call for a degree of labour union cooperation which the present government is deemed to be in a position to ensure with its negotiating capabilities.

The necessity for any radical restructuring of tariffs can be obviated by sealing off the routes of corruption and pilferage. There should be complete computerisation of the marketing function with a salesmanship drive launched on the basis of new railway links forged better passenger and cargo services offered.

The railway's must retrieve the grounds it has lost to other modes of transportation to be commercially viable.

Indisposed Walkie-talkies

There is no denying that violent crime has become an overpowering reality in our society and is progressively influencing the individual mind adversely. This disquieting development has however, been matched very happily by the policemen's increasing application to the evergrowing challenge they are facing.

It has been observed that metropolitan police in Dhaka need about 600 walkie-talkies to cope with both crime and traffic. They have been given less than half of that. And of those commissioned, about 150 — more than half of what is at DMP's disposal — are at present dumped into a godown, having gone out of use for whatever mechanical reason.

This brings us to the very Bengali practice of going for grand capital expenses and never laying out anything on the maintenance of the things constructed or installed or bought. The same has happened to the police walkie-talkies. It would now be very government-like to write the 150 pieces not working simply off and order for a fresh import and purchase of another set of 400-600 walkie-talkies.

Chechnya — Hopeful Signals

For the Russian Federation any further loss of territory as it appeared with the Chechnya crisis, was unthinkable. For it was bound to set in motion a chain reaction as there are many other ethnic cousins of the Chechens in adjacent territories

The Horizon This Week

Arshad-uz Zaman

completion of this part of the deal will enormously strengthen the hand of Gen Alexander Lebed. It appears that he has succeeded in establishing his credibility with the Chechen leaders.



Arshad-uz Zaman with Chechen fighters

endum on independence and Russian insistence that Chechnya remains part of the Russian Federation. The Lebed formula has not been made public but his latest rush from Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, to Moscow was indicative of the fact that a breakthrough might be achieved.

The persistent reports of ill health of Boris Yeltsin have complicated the picture. He looked a hale and hearty figure before the elections when he campaigned vigorously. Since his victory in the elections Yeltsin has made brief appearances in Moscow although he received the US Vice President Al Gore. Yet the reports of Yeltsin's heart attack and indeed his appearance on TV gives the impression of a person, who is definitely not in robust health.

Chechnya has faced Russia with a very tough problem indeed. The crisis erupted when Moscow was slowly coming to terms with the collapse of the Soviet Union, which saw the emergence of a large number of independent Turkic republics. Soviet Union lost her Superpower status and has been trying a holding operation through the newly created Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). For the Russian Federa-

tion any further loss of territory as it appeared with the Chechnya crisis, was unthinkable. For it was bound to set in motion a chain reaction as there are many other ethnic cousins of the Chechens in adjacent territories.

It is in these circumstances that we have witnessed the emergence of Alexander Lebed on the scene as the one who is capable of finding a solution. The fact that he appears to have won the confidence of the Chechens is his greatest trump card. The ceasefire agreement appears to be holding and the Russian troops are pulling out. This is fulfilment of the promise made by Yeltsin.

The Chechen conflict has not produced any victor or vanquished nor was it expected to. For the Russian Federation it is yet another storm signal. The Kremlin has learnt to live with the newly independent Turkic states. She, however, cannot contemplate the secession of other territories, which form part of the Federation. On the other hand a status quo ante as far as Chechnya is concerned is out of the question. The new arrangement will be watched by other neighbours of Chechnya, who will draw appropriate lessons.

The collapse of the Soviet Union nearly five years ago was an earth shattering event. The crisis in Chechnya has demonstrated that the fall out of that event will continue well into the next century.

Food and Development in Bangladesh: Meeting the Challenge

With sound policy and perspective planning, Bangladesh stands a good chance in achieving economic growth based on food and agriculture, which the country has all potentials to achieve, writes Dr Harun K M Yusuf

EVER since the dawn of creation, man has been on the quest for food for survival and propagation. In those ages, most of the time was spent in finding food for the next meal. The discovery of the cultivation of cereals, probably in the near-east, followed by the attainment of the ability to cultivate successive crops and to store food between harvest, was a landmark in the development of the human society.

According to recent FAO estimates, the total world supply of cereals in 1995-96 is 2028 million tons as against a requirement of 1769 million, allowing for an ending surplus (carry-over stocks) of about 260 million tons. The prospects in the coming year (1996-97) is even better.

The figures amply show that despite the unprecedented increase in world population in the last several decades, the world can still feed all its people. But ironically this does not happen so. More than 80 developing countries do not share in this abundance. Living on below \$1 a day, more than 800 million men, women and children of these countries go hungry everyday.

South Asian region shares most of the world poverty. While being home to a quarter of the world's population, it accounts for 39 per cent of the world's poor. The region has one of the highest aggregate poverty levels around 43 per cent in the world.

Agriculture and Economic Growth

The natural endowment of fertile land and water resources have made Bangladesh's economy mainly based on agriculture. About 80 per cent of the people of Bangladesh live in rural areas and agriculture provides nearly 66 per cent of employment to them. In 1993-94, its contribution to GDP was 29.7 per cent at current market price. Sixty per cent of the export earnings of the country are obtained through this sector. Therefore, if Bangladesh has to attain a degree of economic growth, then its agriculture — the land and the water — must have to be used most profitably and judiciously. At the same time, the interest of the farmers, who grow food, has to be sustained.

Crops: Production of rice, which accounts for 95 per cent of total cereal in Bangladesh, registered an all time record increase to nearly 18 million tons in 1989-90, following the devastating flood of 1988. The country sustained bumper harvests

for the next successive three years (1992-93). This was certainly a great achievement for the crop agriculture. National Agricultural Research System (NARS) played a crucial role in introducing modern varieties and developing modern technologies for their management which were used by the farmers through technology transfer by DAE (Directorate of Agriculture Extension) and ASSP (Agricultural Support Services Project).

The net per capita food (rice) availability reached the level of standard requirement of 454-465 g/day during 1989-90 to 1991-92. This led to a complacency of achieving the much longed for self-sufficiency in food for the first time in history of the country. However, this could not be sustained for various reasons: excessive and indiscriminate use of chemical fertilisers, increased cropping intensity and irrigation and finally drought and the fertiliser mismanagement of 1995 — all resulted in fall in rice production. Also fall in rice price had a negative feedback on the farmers to produce rice. This brought down per capita availability of rice to 428 g/day in 1995.

During the decade of 1984-94, the production of potato, vegetables (+ melon) and some fruits increased but due to population growth at an equal rate, the per capita availability did not increase. On the other hand, production of wheat, which could lessen the pressure on rice, registered a negative growth rate (-1.3 per cent). Pulses (protein-dense) and oilseeds (energy-dense) did not show any positive trend in production during this period.

Animal food: The fisheries sub-sector has done splendidly well in the 1983-93 decade. Total fish production increased from 0.73 million tons to 1.02 million (75 per cent inland and 25 per cent marine). The share of fisheries in GDP is increasing and now stands at about 5 per cent. The export earnings through this sector have increased to 12 per cent in 1993-94. Thus, fish contributes to national nutrition and economy to a significant magnitude.

However, this great natural resource faces the danger of degradation as activities for food control, e.g. embankments, sluice gates are on the

gear. It is estimated that by the year 2005, one-third of the nation's fishery habitats will be destroyed as nearly 4 million ha of land will be flood-free.

Livestock sector has also performed well in the decade of 1984-1994 with an increase in production index from 107 in 1984 (1979-81=100) to 132 in 1994. Most remarkable increase has been in poultry (annual growth rate 6.3 per cent) and goat (annual growth rate 7.4 per cent). Despite these increases in fish and livestock production, per capita availability still falls far too short of the requirement.

National Food Basket and the Desirable Dietary Pattern

It is clear that food production in Bangladesh is not enough, not even rice. To fill the gap as far as possible, Bangladesh imports almost all kinds of foods at the expense of hard earned foreign exchange to increase net availability. In spite of this huge exercise to meet the gap, a look at the food basket table shows that the national average diet is not only deficient in total energy (to the extent of 15.6 per cent) (1950 Kcal against the FAO-recommended intake of 2310 kcal/day), but the diet is also seriously imbalanced. Our diet is too much studded with cereals (mostly rice) which contribute 82.4 per cent of total energy, compared to the desirable contribution of at most 55 per cent. On the other hand, the contributions to total energy of all other food items — pulses, oils, animal foods and fruits and vegetables are far less than desired. This makes the diet deficient in proteins and the micronutrients (vitamins and minerals). A vast majority of the population thus suffer from both perceptible hunger (hunger of the stomach) due to intake of inadequate quantity of food and hidden hunger (hunger of body cells for micronutrients) due to intake of inadequate quality of food.

Malnutrition is thus a terrible public health problem in Bangladesh. A single example is: the low birth weight rate below 2.5 kg which is 41 per cent in this country. This marks a bad start in life, due to persistent malnutrition in the mother. Malnutrition is thus propagated from generation to generation. Stunting, wasting,

anemia and guttre are common in the children.

The Biggest Challenge to Growth

The main impediment to growth is poverty. In Bangladesh, rural poverty is the issue of the day, although urban poverty is becoming more and more of a rising problem and will become a big issue in the coming decades if the current rate of migration of rural poor to the cities is not stopped by increasing economic growth and alleviating poverty in the rural areas.

According to a recent BIDS study in 1994, around 29 per cent of the rural population in Bangladesh lived under poverty line 1 (absolute poverty, per capita calorie intake less than 2250 kcal) and 23 per cent lived in 'extreme poverty' under poverty line 2, per capita calorie intake less than 1805 kcal), making a total poverty incidence of 52 per cent. This means that around 500 million people of Bangladesh are poor, around half of them (over 25 million) are among the world's poorest by any standard of development.

Landlessness through various processes, lack of job opportunities and income, burden of dowry, high rate of illiteracy, and therefore lack of skill, lack of capital etc., have been identified as the major determinants of rural poverty. About 25 million youths (educated and uneducated) are unemployed and have no job to do to contribute to growth and national development. This huge workforce and human resource potential can be utilised for development through proper planning.

A segment of the rural poor (around 2-5 per cent) are landless and rootless. Hunger is the cause of their poverty and not just merely a symptom of poverty. They are completely out of any development activity, because they are most of the time busy in the quest for food and most of their body energy is spent in the process of procuring food for the next meal. We therefore have two major categories of workforce to explore — the jobless youth and the poorest of the poor.

Alleviation of Poverty — the Road to Economic Growth: Many poverty alleviation programmes are now in progress with assistance from various UN and other agencies. Many

NGOs are also working with the same objective. In addition, development safety net programmes — e.g. the WFP — assisted rural development (RD) (formally food for work) and the vulnerable groups development (VGD) programmes and the CARE-assisted rural maintenance programme (RMP) are there to help the poorest of the poor. Given small support, the poor can generate big resources. What they need are initial capital, and technical and marketing supports.

In addition to credit and training, some NGOs (e.g. Proshika) are also trying to popularise sustainable agriculture (better named as ecological agriculture) practices through use of bio-fertilisers and bio-pesticides to show that in the long-term perspective, equal aggregate productivity is achieved with ecological agriculture as with the more inorganic fertiliser-intensive modern variety cultivation, but without the latter's long-term adverse effects on soil fertility and biota.

Priorities Ahead

Food production: With increase in population, the demand for food will increase. It is expected that by the year 2010, the population of Bangladesh will increase to about 150 million and the requirement of foodgrain will increase to about 31 million tons from the present requirement of 19 million tons. Of this, requirement for rice alone will be about 30 million tons. Because the total cultivable area will not increase, the increased production will have to come from vertical increase in yield.

Therefore, the top most priority is to increase food production by using its land and water resources. The government has publicly announced subsidy in agriculture and a sum of Tk. 1 billion is set aside for this purpose, which undoubtedly would contribute to agricultural growth by reducing farmers' plight to invest in food production. However, the use of land and water resources shall have to be judicious so that productivity of the land increases without taxing heavily on the fertility of the soil.

Along with rice production of pulses, oilseeds, animal foods and fruits and vegetables shall have to be increased to bring diversity in the national food basket. Fish and poultry

offer great opportunities for the young unemployed to generate enormous economic activity in the country.

Population: Lastly, a word about population. The total size of GDP of Bangladesh is about US\$ 26 billion, which is three times that of Sri Lanka and as much as half that of Malaysia, one of the emerging tigers in South-east Asia. However, all these high sounding trumpets mean very little when the total GDP is diluted to volatile quantity by the vast population size. All out efforts should therefore be made to reduce population growth further, to increase per capita availability of the fruits of growth.

Improving the Quality of Life of the Farmers

The success of agricultural growth depends largely on improving the quality of life of the farmers, i.e. improving their standard of living. This implies a translation of economic achievement, into human development, the two being mutually correlated and reinforcing to each other but not necessarily automatically linked. Economic resources have to be purposefully directed towards human capital development. Human development is therefore the end, economic growth is a means. The major imperative components of human development are education, health and nutrition. Together these make the population more productive conducive to more economic growth, which in turn creates opportunities for more investment for human development. This will set in motion a virtuous circle discarding the prevailing vicious circle.

The human development index (HDI) of Bangladesh is 0.364, which is significantly below the average (0.403) of the same for the countries characterized by low human development. Bangladesh ranks 12 from the bottom in terms of real wealth, compared to 2 for Nepal, 20 for India, 33 for Pakistan and 42 for Sri Lanka.

With expansion of education, health services and nutrition programmes through appropriate budgetary allocation, the situation can be improved. The recently developed National Plan of Action for Nutrition can serve a great deal in this regard.

The writer is a Professor of Biochemistry (Human Nutrition), University of Dhaka. The article is abridged from the keynote speech delivered on the World Food Day, 16 October 1996, at the Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council, Dhaka.

To the Editor...

Star Literature

Sir, Heartiest congratulations for bringing out the felicitous Star Literature. I take the opportunity to give vent to my thoughts on your distinctive selection of materials for the first Star Literature section. This section presents a new vista, a new perception and a new perspective for those readers who themselves are in search of their own self-identity.

The interview of Mr Mohammad Rafique and the essay on 'Bangladesh Literature: Poised for a Lift-off' are thought-provoking, educative and motivational. These two items are helpful in finding a sense of direction for us.

Kaiser Haq's 'Your Excellency' depicts a tortuous environment for others as created by a section of intelligentsia particularly when the former do not like to trudge the path of one or the other party as drum-beaters with the hope of bagging an ambassadorial assignment, director generalship of the National Press Institute or the Bangla Academy, or at least getting a chance to accompany the PM in his globe-trotting with destinations like Beijing, New York, Rome etc.

Professor Zillur Rahman Siddiqui's quest for a mode of writing his memoir is a good

reading. Surely all who aspire for writing their memoir will get some ideas in Mr Siddiqui's 'Myself and Others'. One is benefited to note that Mr Siddiqui is giving prime importance to general readers' interest in deciding upon the style of writing his memoir. Why should he? When one reviews memoirs of world famous personalities, one finds memoir writers write their piece for the pleasure of it. What is the harm if he writes it in his usual style?

To us Star Literature is going to be a widely read feature of The Daily Star. This innovation in our context is a pleasant surprise. We are optimistic that your daily will always have something new to present to the readers regularly on a daily basis, making the daily issue a special one.

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Open up Suhrawardy Udyan

Sir, I am inclined to agree with the letter writer's hypothesis (Star, Nov 27) that the huge Suhrawardy Udyan was deliberately closed by the previous regimes on the plea of ecology,

conservation and tree plantation; while the people are suffering due to lack of spaces for holding public meetings in the city.

Nowadays political meetings are held by blocking vital and busy roads, causing continuous suffering in terms of traffic jams. The political parties should behave with responsibility and the authority concerned should immediately open up some open space for holding meetings and rallies. The previous regime started some dialogue on this issue but nothing came out of it.

Why the metropolis should not have demarcated spots for holding meetings? The residents have the right to expect proper civic amenities in the capital city. Can we see more of positive action than political brick-batting?

A Zabr Dhaka

State of affairs in public offices

Sir, I want to draw attention of authorities concerned about the hopeless state of affairs in most public offices including the police stations, income tax, customs office and so on. One would just wonder if there is

really someone in charge, someone who is responsible and who cares for law and discipline? During the last one decade or so, the moral fibre has broken down so much that officials at different levels openly fix up their 'rates' for different cases at different stages, there being no shame or shakiness or fear for anything, as if it were the rule. We have hardly heard of any public servant being caught red handed and punished exemplarily to deter such incidence.

In fact, the attitude has become — 'get off all problems by paying what is necessary'. The persons who are constrained to pay bribe are not at fault because they know for sure going to the higher authorities is not easy, nor is it at all profitable! In fact, those who complained to the higher authorities have been much more harassed through false cases, concocted allegations and so on. All their efforts boil down to an unavoidable acceptance of what is going on. The past government totally failed to restore public confidence in honesty and integrity of public officials.

But what about the present one? Have they shown enough agility or seriousness about the problems of extortion and exploitation? It appears as though the valiant freedom fighter who

is now the Home Minister is far from realising the gravity of the situation or maybe he doesn't have any commitment in line with what the PM says: 'Catch him if he is wrong even if he claims to belong to my party!' We are afraid unless real seriousness is shown in thought and action, it will be just futile uttering and high-sounding rhetoric.

Let us think about what is going on in Biman and the Customs to begin with. The Biman staff, it is alleged, wouldn't normally welcome you for booking, confirming and reconfirming. They do whatever they wish to. So when you are told that there is no seat in a given flight and when you 'manage' it somehow and get on the flight you see half the seats are vacant! This is known to all in the authorities and they know the staff who do so and they are supposed to know how it takes to national exchequer! But has anyone heard about any deterrent action on this front?

Think of the reported cruel, unbelievable harassment and torture to Mr S Mia who died because of the Customs officials'. The action taken and heard about so far is far from what is expected! The authorities seem to move in snail's pace and have no real concern, not to speak of patriotism. The atti-

zens living abroad are our valuable wage-earners on whom our national income itself depends substantially. But what deadly dishonour did we do to them and yet there appears to be no real awakening? Why? Had all the authorities been asleep until the doctors declared Mr S Mia as beaten to death?

The newspapers of 18th September '96 published the story of one kid Abul Ashraf harassed badly by the immigration people at Sylhet Airport. Is it the way we treat our citizens living abroad and sending money for our national welfare? There must have been some senior officials at the Airport who could tackle the problem decently and on the spot but they didn't! Nevertheless it is good to hear that the DIG, Sylhet has put the culprits under suspension.

How long does our administration expect to befool the public? Is it not being too late to realise the gravity of the situation? Why did the people at Dinajpur and Bogra turn hostile against the officials?

The new government will do well to think about the whole thing and think quickly enough so as to take action however ruthless before it is too late.

Ahmed Dhaka