

Put It Down

When the Jessore jail revolt had passed two days and there was no sign of an early solution, we counselled the government to be patient; we are happy that the government has been very patient. But the government's avoidance of harsh measures has evidently sent wrong signals to prisoners in other jails. Tangail and Barisal jails have already had a taste of it. Tangail jail now is under the control of inmates and Barisal jail had to be wrested from prisoner control. Yesterday, Dhaka Central Jail also experienced similar trouble. If we had advised patience, we also wanted the government to be firm, without however, articulating the adjective. The prisoners in Jessore, Tangail and Barisal have misread government's choice of patience. Before some more do so in any other jail, the government must put its foot down and crush the rebellions. This is high time right signals went to all inmates of all the jails in Bangladesh.

Quelling a jail riot has historically required a particularly harsh approach. Most times the jail facilities had to be bloodied in a very sad but example-setting way. The action the prisoners are forcing the authorities to, unfortunately, will affect the innocent among them too, and their member is not insignificant. It is a sad fact that these anti-revolt ones are being forced by circumstances to do some direly criminal act, doubly losing their freedom — once for committing crime and then for living among criminals.

The harshness that may now be called into play will be justified not only through establishing order in the jails — but in fact by going seriously into the matter of jail reforms. The problem of accommodation is directly related to the question of early disposal of criminal cases. The under trial prisoners would not at all be required to be lodged in jails if every case proceeding could be dispensed with within a month or two. Similarly, a meaningful jail reform would involve many agencies and take much time. But there is no harm in enunciating the government resolve in the matter while the jails are brought to order.

There is every chance that the jail revolts aren't materialising as a protest against jail conditions. But as long as the condition plea holds good, the government has hardly the moral authority to go for the other and possibly, conspiratorial origins of there. Speak it loud and bold that jail conditions would be improved. And please give a time-frame for that. And put down the abominable things firmly.

Grameen Court

So, the signs of decentralisation in the legal sector are emerging. A report on grameen or village court in yesterday's issue of The Daily Star served an early and welcome intimation of the government initiative to get the process started. It could not have been timed better.

In fact, in a country like Bangladesh with an overwhelming rural population, such a system with a view to facilitating the whole process of judiciary would have been no less welcome had it arrived earlier. Because the lamentable fact of our legal system being haunted by the spectre of colonial callousness even after twenty-five years of independence has so far contributed mostly to the suffering of the villagers.

On one hand, has been the tardy and tortuous legal system that has become a source of scare than succour from years of nonchalance by the authorities to review and update the laws of the land by being rooted to contemporary reality while on the other, is general poverty, lack of education and prejudice of the rural people. The sinister alliance of the two factors has helped increase the distance of the sufferers from the proverbial long arm of the law. Law's status of an ineffectual scarecrow has only contributed to the proliferation of injustice, the hydra-headed monster. And sandwiched between the remoteness of legal protection or remedial measures and the relentless oppression of some submen, the rural women here are destined to live a tearful life. One of the traditional ingredients in the tragedy of rural Bangladesh is the dispute over dowry and the saga of sufferings engendered by it.

So, when the State Minister for Law Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, probably unwittingly, dubs dowry as a trivial issue, understatement tends to border on contradiction to the objective behind the formation of grameen court. The concept of the court, however, sounds sound and innovative on paper. It remains to be seen how soon the government can have the idea cemented in reality and the heart of justice seeking villagers.

The Sick Zoo

Dhaka's zoo was expected to take a turn for the better after the furore over the 'poisoned deaths' of some big cats. The motive was laid bare once the criminals were nabbed after a longish hunt and naturally, the atmosphere there was expected to record some improvement. Unfortunately, that has not been the case. According to a report published in a Bengali daily yesterday, city's only zoo has of late witnessed a new dimension of undesirable incident happening around it.

While the list of sick animals has lengthened, a new evil — sickness of visitors, particularly, the children — has cropped up. It is no longer the question of the zoo animals' health but that of the visitors. Something is really rotten in the animal conservatory at a faraway Mirpur.

Poor maintenance has already played havoc with the objective of entertainment and conservation of the rare species of animals. The latest news emanating from the zoo can only make public view of it dimmer.

Dhaka is notorious for its constraint in sources of entertainment. If the zoo, one of the few places of innocent amusement, has to be cut out on health grounds, a sorer tale of urban life cannot be readily imagined. We hope the authorities would take immediate steps to clear the atmosphere of the zoo in every sense of the word.

Assessing Government Policies: An Alternative Angle

The major areas where the government should tinker with its policy instruments are education, irrigation, communication and electricity. In other words, physical and social infrastructure development in rural areas should constitute the corner-stone of government's policy influences.

AGRICULTURAL growth, rural development and poverty alleviation constitute the heart of development objectives in Bangladesh. With a view to augmenting agricultural output and income and to reducing poverty in rural areas successive governments of Bangladesh had been initiating and implementing a plethora of policies, programmes and interventions. The pockets where the government generally makes pervasive presence are, inter alia, pricing and distribution of irrigation and fertilizer to encourage diffusions, interventions in the foodgrains market for stabilization and enhancement of entitlements for the most disadvantaged groups, public works programme for employment generation in rural areas, opening up of agricultural input markets to allow private participation and ensure competition, etc.

There are, in circulation, plenty of impact assessments of those policies, programmes and interventions. The impacts of government policies in agricultural and rural development in Bangladesh are generally assessed using indicators like income, output and employment. Hindsight, these indicators are treated as end products of any government policy, programme

or intervention. However, notwithstanding the intrinsic merits of these indicators in telling success or failure stories of government policies, it is alleged that they seem to say very little about the impact of policies on overall deprivation levels of the households on whom policies are likely to impact upon. And since deprivation is the converse of development, with equal force, the same indicators also tend to expose very little the levels of development of the households.

The Centre for Human Resources Development (CHRD) of Jahangirnagar University, in a recently-completed research work, attempted to float an unconventional line of reasoning in the realm of assessment of government policies and to suggest a different recipe for impact assessment. Such an attempt is premised on the notion that the impact of government policies need to be glanced from a broader angle that not only tends to encompass growth of output, income and employment but also, at the same breath, embraces developmental issues of the households. On that score, the researchers constructed a composite index for measuring development that lies very close to the concept of widely articulated Human Development Index (HDI) of the UN and the constituents of the index fall close to the heart of now almost defunct or unpopular basic needs approach. The composite index, called the deprivation index (DI), was applied to 425 rural households to measure their levels of deprivation.

So here we are, there is not a word about the decline of employment due to modern technologies. In the last few decades, entire cottage industries such as shoe-making and soap-making have been wiped out by multinational corporations. Now the tailors are being targeted by ready-made suit manufacturers. Unemployment has increased along with food insecurity. Yet, the same consumer networks and private investment responsible for such a decline are held out as the panacea for food security!



Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

one-fifth of the households in landless groups were found to be the least deprived/most developed compared to more than four-fifths in large land size groups. The monotonic fall in the deprivation level could be observed as one moved up the ladder of land size groups.

What factors can be adduced to the deprivation level? The researchers examined two types of variables viz. (a) household and (b) policy variables. The

households. How does the impact assessment criteria of CHRD differ with the on-going exercises? In fact, the conventional route to the assessment of impacts, allegedly, is prone to follies for a number of reasons but only two of the important ones need special mention. First, isolated impact of policies on different end products (e.g. output, employment and income) tend to leave much room for erroneous calculations and conclusions. One needs to arrive at a composite index to accommodate the diversified impact of policies at household level. Second, impact of the policies need to be focused in terms of the overall deprivation/development of the households through examining their expenditure patterns as opposed on a heavy reliance to the per capita income indicators.

It appears from the CHRD findings that the government of Bangladesh could affect the development/deprivation level of the rural people through its policy influences. The major areas where the government should tinker with its policy instruments are education, irrigation, communication and electricity. In other words, physical and social infrastructure development in rural areas should constitute the corner-stone of government's policy influences.

Among the policy variables, social and physical infrastructure facilities stood up as the foremost important factors to dictate the levels of deprivation/development. Irrigation, roads, electricity and education seemed to contribute significantly to the development of the

Escapism at the World Food Summit

Dr Bharat Jhunjhunwala writes from New Delhi

In the present situation the industrial countries are extremely worried about the threat in their own countries from food scarcity and environmental degradation in the developing countries.

ONE would have expected the World Food Summit organised by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) to make some concrete suggestions for facing the impending food crisis. But all that was achieved was a reiteration of the same old clichés about free trade and population control.

First, there is nothing in the Plan of Action 'hammered out' at the summit to deal with the perverted consumption patterns of the industrial countries. According to the estimates of the World Watch Institute, 'if the world's affluent cut their consumption of grain-fed livestock products by 10 per cent, they could free up 64 million tons of grain for direct human consumption, enough to cover world population growth for some 27 months.'

The summiters did recognise this in their Declaration but one finds not even a mention of it in the Plan of Action. On the contrary, it says that food production be increased to

meet the 'demand for new food products due to rising standards of living and changes in consumption patterns' (para 23). Instead of seeking to change these wasteful consumption patterns, the summiters endorsed the need to meet them.

Second, it is recognised that food production would require appropriate and up-to-date technologies. This is to be done by national efforts and international cooperation. In economics, there is a concept of shadow pricing. In a situation where a private activity also leads to social benefits, the society must subsidise it in order to secure the public good.

In the present situation the industrial countries are extremely worried about the threat in their own countries from food scarcity and environmental degradation in the developing countries. Transfer

of technologies of sustainable agriculture would beget benefits to them by recession of such threats. It follows that they must subsidise the transfer of these technologies. Yet, all that that such transfer should take place 'consistent with international trade rules' (para 39).

Thus, while the industrial countries are cognizant of the benefits accruing to them from sustainable agricultural practices in the South, they are unwilling to pay the price for these benefits and the summiters are happy with such a position of theirs.

Third, the Declaration admits that the inadequacy of household and national incomes limit access to food that is available. Therefore, equitable access to financial and natural resources must be promoted. Pray, how is that to be

benefits of sustainable technologies for the industrial countries and demanding compensation for the same; 3) securing better terms of trade by South-South cooperation in forums like the OPEC; and 4) giving due importance to sustainable technologies such as the 'old-fashioned' animal manures; 5) working out a strategy for recharging of our ground water resources to combat the depletion by excessive exploitation; and 6) restricting the use of mechanical trawlers in our oceans to sustainable levels.

Instead of coming to grips with these issues, the summit only tried to push the agenda of the North. In the Plan of Action we find, among others, the following exhortations regarding unrelated issues: 1) develop democratic policy-making and legislative processes (para 11b); 2) give adequate attention to equity issues between men and women (para 30); and 3) encourage foreign investments (para 52c).

These issues are certainly relevant in their own right. But had the FAO called this summit for these purposes? It is time that the leaders of the South put their foot down on the hijacking of all international fora by the North to push its own agenda.

The writer is a political economist and a writer.

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.

Unique BTV

Sir, The politicians in power are all the time harping on 'democracy' (local model). The most noticeable is the electronic media — BTV and BB.

An analysis of the evening news bulletin will reveal some stable trends:

i) Too much politics and politicisation — the political sector dominates the time slot. Why? Why politics has been made the number one priority at the national and societal levels? What is the priority of development? Why politics and development are mixed, and cannot be separated? Whose idea is this? Why news and discussions on development issues have to be tinged with political overtones or most of the time? Why personalities are brought in?

ii) Why so many speeches and opening ceremonies are covered? Why the conversion of a section of a telephone exchange has to be opened by a Minister? Why non-politicians cannot head ceremonies? If there are no speeches, what BTV will show?

iii) Why politicians have been made the No-1 citizens in ALL spheres of the society? Self-promotion? Why this discrimination and self-consciousness or narcissism? Why the politicians crave for so much publicity? The PM may issue a directive not to show her one day in a week!

We are living a distorted life with too much daily politics. AZ, Dhaka.

Begum Rokeya University

Sir, Pairaband is the birthplace of Begum Rokeya. Saber family was an aristocratic one of Rangpur district. Though Begum Rokeya came from an aristocratic family, she could not get the facility of higher and modern education. She learnt with the help of his brothers. She was married to an educated person, who inspired her to learn more and more. But her married life was very short. Rokeya dedicated her life for spreading education to the womenfolk. She established school and gathered female students braving all odds and superstitions. She tried her best to bring out the women from the darkness of 'four walls'.

This lowering lady spared the comfort of her own life and spent it to impart education to women. We remember this great lady only once or twice a year. And likewise, Pairaband be-

comes festive only once or twice a year. The home of Begum Rokeya has already been taken away by the unauthorised people. Only one or two small remnants of brick-built walls are the witnesses of the birthplace of Begum Rokeya. One or two schools and one signboard indicating her name is there.

That is all about the birthplace of Begum Rokeya who dedicated her life for women's education. The people of Rangpur were demanding establishment of a university there. The demand received the attention of many but no university has yet been established. And it is not known whether it will be established at all in the near future.

Pairaband is very near to the Rangpur-Dhaka highway. Congenial environment is there to set up a university complex. Can we not establish a university after Begum Rokeya at Pairaband to pay our homage to this great lady? Will the government and non-government agencies take the matter seriously?

Mahbubul Haque Chowdhury Dy General Manager, Sonali Bank, Head Office, Dhaka

Anniversary and demand

Sir, It was December 11, 1996 the 56th founding anniversary of the Bengal Agricultural Institute, now Bangladesh Agricultural Institute (BAI), situated at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka which was founded by the great leader Sher-e-Bangla A K Fazlul Haq. It was indeed a historic event because the worthy son of the soil Sher-e-Bangla A K Fazlul Haq, State Minister for Jute and Textile came to BAI campus to grace the occasion as the chief guest. While on the campus, the minister listened to the academic and administrative problems of the BAI ventilated by the teachers and students.

The Director General of BARI, Dr M A Mazed and the Principal of BAI, Prof M Q Zaman appraised the minister about the present situation of BAI. The minister assured that he would enquire into the matter and asked the teachers' and students' representatives to meet him some time to discuss issues relating to BAI's demand for BIT-type autonomy.

I along with my colleagues and students do sincerely hope that Fazlul Haq, not only as a minister of the cabinet but as the son of the late charismatic leader Sher-e-Bangla A K Fazlul Haq would do everything possible on his part to turn this prestigious agri-educational insti-

tute into an ideal seat of learning by sanctioning autonomy at a time when the government has given top-priority to agricultural development.

M Zahidul Haque Bangladesh Agricultural Institute Sher-e-Bangla Nagar Dhaka-1207.

Demanding punishment

Sir, The news on Tasbidul Quran, 'Mohitsunnah' in Chittagong is horrifying. It is learnt, the head of the so-called madrasah, Maulana Saleh Ahmed and his collaborators, in the name of religious education, carried on brutal medieval-type torture on the little children binding them with iron fetters to prevent them from fleeing. They earned thousands in terms admission, tuition and other fees etc., from the guardians of the victims.

But they did not even give the students sufficient food, let alone education. In this century when almost everybody is becoming conscious about child rights, a few are creating adverse reaction in public minds by making such abominable vices. I think, a strong racket is engaged in it. Those who are involved in it, whoever they are, should be severely punished.

Afsana Chowdhury Enry S S Road, Sirajganj.

Beautifying Dhaka

Sir, We are very encouraged to learn from your newspaper that the authority concerned is taking urgent steps to improve the living standard of the people in Dhaka. Beautifying the city is also one of the steps they are contemplating on. We have a few suggestions to make.

For over two decades the city has been robbed of its trees, parks, ponds and water reservoirs that spotted the city. This has done great damage to the ecology.

Moreover, hundreds of multi-storied buildings are on the rise, and the need for some open space for the children to play and the elderly to stretch their legs will be more acute in coming years.

Under these circumstances, attempts to allow buildings to be built on the few remaining parks or open spaces should not be allowed. To name one instance: the open space behind the petrol pump near Gulshan Circle 1 appears to have already been given to builders. We draw the attention of the government to such neglect of their good intention and request them to take urgent corrective measures.

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OPINION

Torture in Police Custody and the State of Law and Order

Fatema Ahmed

Although some police officers have been flatly denying the righteous among them would agree that atrocities by some members of the police have gone beyond proportions. After the Yasmin murder at Dinajpur and the subsequent events all and sundry should have learnt the lesson that whatever amount of power a few cops may have that is nothing compared to the power of the people. Almost all the police officials of Dinajpur including some of the civil authorities were either prosecuted, transferred or punished. But it seems this was not enough for the others. A few police officials in Chittagong raped and tortured Sima, so much so that almost a mass movement took place there. One alleged terrorist has been killed in police custody in one of the city police stations recently.

When some one is beaten in public and later tortured to death in custody they deny all charges and blame the victim for having been sick or for having committed suicide! Many of such things happen even in urban/metropolitan areas where the SPs, DCs, Commissioners and even the Home Minister himself are present. Is it not an irony that the enforcers of law would break law, taking it in their own hands and considering their victims as punishable to death by themselves in the most ruthless manner? Civil rights workers, lawyers and others have been crying hoarse but many police officials perhaps think they can do whatever they like and none can really bring them to book!

The above being the state of affairs in the law and order situation, where many a law enforcer has been giving a damn to law, what could the criminals do? They are only taking advantage of the situation. People at large hoped that with the present Home Minister being an ex-Major and a valiant freedom fighter, all concerned in the police and the terror world will think twice before indulging in any indiscipline or unlawful activity. But we have to say regretfully that the people in general are rather disappointed.

The Home Minister's and the IGP's surprise visits to police stations and elsewhere have produced little results because those in charge of different police stations and outposts even in Dhaka do not seem to take that seriously. The situation in the far-flung areas is believably far worse as there is none to over-

see the untold atrocity and mis-use of power.

The weeklies and dailies have been publishing stories of police failures to deter crimes against innocent, helpless people including women and added to that are crimes by some members of the police themselves. What does it mean after all? A conspiracy to worsen the law and order situation, make the democratic government a failure and enforce total anarchy? If not, why are those who are in charge not acting with real force and vigour instead of just lip-service and eye-wash — constituting committees and suspending some officials only to appease the otherwise outraged public? The present government would do well to note that one of the main causes of public rejection of the earlier government was their failure to tackle the worsening law and order situation.

The authorities including the PM herself, the Home Minister, IGP and others have to prove they are stronger than the criminals whom they can teach an unforgettable lesson. There is very little time left to do this. They have to act and act with all seriousness and vigour and bring to book all those who challenge the state authority and take law in their own hands. Be it some members of the law enforcing authorities themselves or followers of any party or platform in position or opposition. It should be remembered that history records everything and the fleeting public memory should not be taken for granted.

The authorities may consider the following steps to tackle the situation and ensure positive improvement on the national security arena: 1) The officers-in-charge of all police stations as well as their supervisory authorities the Inspectors/ACPs/ASPs should be made directly responsible for all untoward incidents in their respective areas including the police stations and outposts. Blaming and thereby closing the subordinate should not let the seniors go unquestioned.

2) The district officials especially the Deputy Commissioners/SPs/Metropolitan Police Commissioners should visit all police stations and areas under their control at least once a week and not just once or twice a year! The weekly routine visit of DCs/SPs and in case they are busy their deputies like the ADCs/Addl SPs will itself act as

a deterrent to many crimes. The official transport given to them must be made good use of and in case of need they must be provided with more transport and other facilities.

3) The IGP should talk to the DIGs of Divisions everyday about developments on the law and order front and possible corrective measures thereof. The DIGs in their turn should be in close touch with the SPs on a routine basis and not only after some serious situation has developed. In case of default/negligence by any important official under them, necessary action should be initiated forthwith.

4) Recently, the IGP was reported to have told the press that the police personnel themselves are victims of injustice and overwork which sounds to be true in many a case as a policeman has to work for long hours before his replacement could arrive. This is all due to shortage of trained personnel. The IGP should give authority to recruit educated young men on competitive basis, train them and post at places where they have challenges to face.

5) Police officials have to be left free of political influence. The PM herself has assured them about this and yet there seem to remain a lot of hesitation for reasons not so transparent. Nevertheless, the police as well as the civil authorities should be allowed to work freely as per the provisions of law and not under pressure from any quarter.

6) Courageous, dedicated officers/officials should be given advance promotion, increments and other rewards just as the reverse should be done in case of those who indulge in irresponsibility, complicity with crime and negligence to duty. While deterrent punishment should be given for failures, encouraging rewards/recognition should not be late to reach the official concerned.

7) Finally, the Home Minister has to be vigilant, up and doing and quick in reviewing trends and events and taking measures purely on objective basis uninfluenced by anything but the dictates of law and justice. Since he has already assured the nation of real action in the near future, let us hope and pray for his success. Let this be forgotten that the nation's socio-economic prosperity and welfare depends largely on the state of law and order.