

Presidential Candour

President Shahabuddin has again spoken out about the need of the hour. It is eliminating terrorism, he said while opening on Wednesday a workshop on women and children repression and the proposed bill to curb it.

This too is also common knowledge but there is hardly a soul in the land who would say it. One reason for that is nobody believes this will happen. Does the President believe otherwise? Well, he feels as the President of the nation he must tell the truth, he must do his cautioning and counselling.

And with consummate skill he marries the two issues by saying that terrorism thrives through the parties' use of this as also for the benefit of some high and mighty in the society. To paraphrase him it is mainly this dependence on the armed cadres — the big force behind terrorism — that doesn't allow the major political parties to come any closer than now, even on questions of utmost national urgency.

True enough but there is none except Shahabuddin to blurt it out. And that is why when history would give a chapter to one party and a chapter to another, Shahabuddin's performance will shine with unusual, unusually mindfilling luminescence. As in all past occasions of speaking out his mind, we wholly endorse his insistence that it will take two to see the nation out of its present social predicaments.

The President was forthright in coming so strongly against the bill, in its present form, on curbing violation of children and women. He agreed with the women's activist groups that the bill should not cover terrorism. He explained for the edification of the nation what made the government to go for this silly thing — there is nothing in existing law to discipline a terrorist. And he also didn't see the need for a repeat law on women and children repression. He plainly said the Law Ministry was ill-advised to come forth with such a patchy thing.

There cannot be two opinions on the soundness of the Presidential observation. And we must put value on his reminding us that all law is bad law if not put into practice. President Shahabuddin is helping the government and the nation with his non-partisan knowledge and candour. The government must take its cue and in time.

A Glut of Educated People?

The figures, the Planning State Minister gave the Jatiya Sangsad on Wednesday are nightmarish. No, not the total member of unemployed citizens which stands at 83.60 lakh. This is slightly more than 1 in 15 persons or about 7 per cent. It doesn't panic us. The actual figure must be higher. The surveyors are not likely to have treated married or widowed women, or for that matter adult women waiting to be betrothed or resigned to a life of spinsterhood as unemployed in which case the figure gets alarming at 14 per cent. Even so, in a nation of sweeping poverty, this is not a surprise figure. We know employment in the villages, where most of our people live, is a rare thing. And those counted as employed there include many who are only seasonably employed.

What indeed is shocking is the breakdown where it says there are 4,000 PhD level scholars among the unemployed and so are 10,000 diploma engineers, half that number graduate engineers, the same number of doctors, 26,000 post-graduates and 1.10 lakh graduates. It is difficult to understand how a doctor can be unemployed. The doctor is best equipped to employ himself. The engineers' case is a little more challenging. To get self-employed he or she will need capital and an endowment of innovation in engineering as well as in business. Although this scope of selfemployment is there, we believe the reported 5,000 doctors and 15,000 engineers are not in any gainful work. Fantastic! Or is it tragic?

What about the 4,000 highest learned persons, all unemployed? How can this be? And 26,000 masters level persons? With a lakh and more graduates jobless we are soon going to get them working as semiskilled people and menials. The more cheery will be the situation as a goodly part of Bangladesh's employers have not read up to the degree level.

What can we conclude from these figures? How we hit the saturation point in our society's need for educated persons? We don't need anymore of them because there is a glut? If we need them and more why can't we provide them with work? The answer to the quandary is the gap between the true national need for, say doctors and engineers and teachers and the size of our economy and administration, both private and governmental which can absorb them. We need metallurgists to fabricate our own machines. But our economy and industry has not grown enough to fabricate machines, howsoever necessary for the nation, and continue to import them wholesale including parts which we could make with our limited technology. Our higher education establishments are not broad enough to absorb 4,000 more PhDs. We need it broadened, far more broadened. But we are stuck up with our one agricultural, one medical and one engineering university and six general universities. Why?

The uneducated sector of our society has for many years been proving particularly productive. They have almost offset our food deficit, running neck to neck with a booming population. The contribution to national wealth by our educated sector is poor and its acceleration is perhaps even poorer. There is something very rotten somewhere in this scenario. There must be some right buttons to put this into right gears.

A Bridge to Bridge over the Woes

But to reap home the harvest, something more needs to be done. And government has to play a positive role by providing rural infrastructural facilities, especially, establishing feeder roads, market-outlets and taking up more development projects.

A dream just came true. Bangabandhu Bridge on the mighty Jamuna was opened to traffic on 23rd June. It is not only a bridge over a river but a bridge to bridge over the socio-economic disparity between the two major parts of the country. We had been dreaming of a prosperous Bangladesh since our inception as an independent state but with a part remaining almost dissociated from the whole. Now the economy is likely to head towards more integration and a Padma bridge could make it full-fledged. The 4.8 km long bridge — some 120 km off the capital — could eventually turn the deprived north-west region (NWR) into a booming one to add few percentage points to our GDP. The bridge would be used — unlike many others — not only to allow easy and time-saving transportation but also to carry gas and electricity to the other side of the Jamuna.

We, therefore, recall with gratitude the dreamer Bangabandhu who felt its necessity in the post-independence period and to that effect, made it an agenda in his Japan tour back in 1973. We also would like to record our appreciation of those who worked hard — in successive regimes — towards the fulfilment of the dream. Rightly said that the construction of the bridge is the greatest achievement since the Victory on December 16, 1971. The completion of the bridge, perhaps, puts us few miles ahead in terms of projecting our image to the outside world. Given resources, political commitment and a sense of direction we demonstrated that we are equally apt at evincing our ability. People of this country also sacrificed immensely by paying surcharges and thus helping to mobilise domestic resources for the bridge.

I am personally of the view that this largest infrastructure investment in Bangladesh could, possibly, make a dent to our pernicious poverty level. In this connection, it may be mentioned here that we have already collected bench-mark survey data from five villages in the project area (NWR) and two villages in control areas (Tangail). The aim is to see the impact afterwards with a revisit to the surveyed households. But for the interested readers, let me place here few statistics about the region.

The gross domestic product of the NWR is estimated to be one-fifth of the nation's output. But NWR's per capita output is the lowest among the four major regions. Mentionably, the region embraces about one-fourth of the total population of the country.

Compared to Bangladesh as a whole, this region is more agricultural. Bangladesh witnessed structural change in her economy with the share of agriculture to GDP facing a gradual wane. The winds of such ited manufacturing activities (industries) which export products out of the region and virtually none that exports out of the country.

The region also lags behind in terms of literacy rate. According to 1991 census, NWR had a literacy rate of 27 per cent compared to about 33 per cent — the national average. On the other hand, the adult literacy rate in NWR is reported to be about 37 per cent compared to about 43 per cent at the national level.

A recent Asian Development Bank sponsored study (North-West Area Development study project) — from which we borrowed source of our earlier statistics — observes that if consumption expenditure by government increases by 10 per cent, then the impact on gross regional product is an increase

of 2.5 per cent. Large increases in government programme fail to inject large increase in output owing mainly to low multiplier effect originating from backward production structure and infrastructural facilities.

The billion-dollar bridge is now available to bridge over the constraints bedeviling the growth of output at a desirable pace. The pertinent question is what kinds of benefits are likely to spring from this massive investment project? We can only guess some of the outcomes which need to be made real assessment of through conducting empirical studies. First, the bridge should impart perceptible influence on the level of prices, both input and output: (a) The price difference between say, Dhaka and Dinajpur should come down with timely movement of goods and services; (b) the bridge shall have its impact on land use pattern and production structure in rural areas in NWR. Most likely the production of perishable items that have hitherto been discouraged, would increase; (c) non-farm activities would shoot up with the advent of a

communication network that largely banks on the big bridge; (d) manufacturing sector would expand in the face of gas, electricity and other related facilities being available; (e) information on new varieties of crops, new technology etc would reach NWR at a faster pace than ever before; (f) there would more movement of people to and from and (g) last but not the least, the bridge would open up wide opportunities for communication that could go beyond the national frontiers.

But to reap home the harvest, something more needs to be done. And government has to play a positive role by providing rural infrastructural facilities — especially, establishing feeder roads, market-outlets and taking up more development projects. Only then can we expect the big project to deliver big output. The ultimate objective is economic growth and alleviation of poverty. The bridge is just a derivative of that goal.

With the completion of Bangabandhu Bridge right on time, our expectations begin to rise. We now await a bridge on the river Padma to connect the southern part of Bangladesh with other regions, mainly with Dhaka and Chittagong. Let us marshal all our efforts and harness as much as domestic resources, towards the fulfilment of another dream.



Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

changes are yet to reach the region. Agriculture still accounts for half of the regional output. Side by side, the share of manufacturing to GDP constitutes only 3 per cent compared to the national average of 11-13 per cent. Needless to mention here, perhaps, that lack of infrastructure facilities (the major among which is the newly constructed bridge) hindered investments in manufacturing in this region. There is very limited

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100 Days of BJP-led Government

Performance Non-satisfactory: Opponents Closing Ranks

Pallab Bhattacharia writes from New Delhi

Prospects of Vajpayee government's continuance hinges on how far BJP is able to pull along with its allies, particularly Jayalalitha

THE BJP-led government completed 100 days in office on Friday (26 June) amidst mounting criticism of its performance and first clear signs of opposition parties closing ranks to topple it and scout for an alternative.

The BJP went into the parliamentary elections in February-March on the main planks of providing a "stable government and an able Prime Minister". But in the last three months or so, the party has increasingly found that leading a coalition consisting of regional parties pursuing their disparate local agenda has dented its claim of providing a stable government.

However, BJP sources say the party derives comfort from the fact that Atal Bihari Vajpayee remains the best bet for Prime Ministership and the last 100 days have not affected his image as a man best suited for the post. He has remained an embodiment of moderation in a party whose policies have been influenced to a large extent by the hard line RSS.

The BJP leadership admits that the performance of the Vajpayee government has been less than satisfactory and attributes this to the inexperience in administration. For instance, the bungling over the steep hike in petrol price and rolling it back within 24 hours buttresses this, it pointed out.

The multiple nuclear tests conducted last month have shown that the BJP government is determined to make India stand up to be regarded as a force to reckon with in spite of opposition criticism at home that it had set of an arms race in South Asia.

What the debate about the tests did most was to expose the double-standard of recognised nuclear power states with Vajpayee repeatedly asserting that they do not have any right to talk about nuclear disarmament while stockpiling their own nuclear arsenals.

But handling of the post-test situation especially the strident anti-Pakistan anti-China remarks by some senior BJP leaders in the context of India's security concerns led to a diplomatic gaffe that could have been avoided by exercising a little restraint.

The Vajpayee government's maiden budget was a finely-executed tight-rope walk between BJP's much-touted "swadeshi" (economic nationalism) giving protection to some domestic industries and at the same time not putting off the foreign investors all together.

There were some bold decisions like reduction of agricultural subsidies in the form of hike in the price of Urea and withdrawal of free electricity to farmers. But the decisions had to be rolled back under pressure from BJP's allies.

And this is where BJP must have learnt with a lot of discomfiture that its theory about leading the coalition is not working all that smoothly. BJP has never been a great believer in coalition politics and spared no opportunity to have digs at the 19 months of United Front rule describing it as a "bundle of contradictions".

But when it became clear just before the general elections that it would have to rely on an assortment of parties to come to power, the BJP made a conscious effort to readjust its stand by saying that a numerically stronger lead party would provide stability to a coalition.

Pitfalls of coalitions politics began to manifest even before Vajpayee could take oath as Prime Minister when AIADMK supreme Jayalalitha kept BJP on the tenterhooks for quite some days before submitting to the President K R Narayanan the letter declaring her party's support to the Vajpayee-led coalition.

In order to facilitate the coalition, the BJP put on the backburner controversial issues like temple construction at the disputed site in Ayodhya, uniform civil code and abrogation of special status to Jammu and Kashmir.

During its 100 days in power, the BJP has learned that its theory on coalition politics is not working all that well as AIADMK, Trinamool Congress led by Mamata Banerjee and Samata Party headed by Defence Minister George Fernandes stepped up the protests and pressures on Vajpayee government for not obliging them on their demand for dismissals of governments headed by their political rivals in Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Bihar.

The coalition witnessed an uneasy war of words among some of its constituents when a cabinet minister belonging to

AIADMK had resigned following his chargesheeting by a court for alleged involvement in a corruption case. A stung Jayalalitha mounted pressure demanding ouster of four other cabinet ministers, including Home Minister L K Advani, for "facing court cases".

The relations between BJP and AIADMK have progressively worsened with Jayalalitha recently launching the sharpest attacks on BJP accusing it of having "secret links" with her opponent DMK to split her party. The slanging-match between the coalition partners proves the coordination committee set up by them to sort out differences among them did not work smoothly.

Even as BJP is coming to terms with the prospects of coalition politics, it could hardly derive any comfort from two developments in quick succession — (1) former Prime Minister Chandrashekhar's call to pull down Vajpayee government and support to Congress-led government as an alternative and (2) former Defence Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav joining hands with former Bihar Chief Minister Laloo Prasad Yadav to rally behind a possible Congress-led coalition.

Although the BJP sought to dismiss as "non-event" the con-

ing together of the two Yadavs, who buried their hatchet, to form a new political front, the fact remains that Samajwadi Party and Rashtriya Janata Dal are two major players in India's politically key states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar which send 179 members to Lok Sabha.

While Congress welcomed the Samajwadi Party and Rashtriya Janata Dal forming a new front, it gave a cold response, at least for the time being, to Chandrashekhar's call. A day after the former premier asked the Congress to take the initiative to form an alternative government, the party's highest policy-making forum Congress Working Committee met and merely "took note" of his suggestion and reiterated its known stand of playing the role of "constructive opposition".

The nearest Congress came to declare that it would form an alternative government was to state that the party "would not fail to discharge its responsibility if the Vajpayee government collapses under its own weight."

But, arithmetic right now does not favour Congress and its supporting parties whose combined strength barely crosses 250 in the 542-member Lok Sabha as against 266 of BJP and its allies.

Under the circumstances, prospects of Vajpayee government's continuance hinges on how far BJP is able to pull along with its allies, particularly Jayalalitha whose critical outburst against the saffron party is giving it anxious moments.

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.

US \$300b short

Sir, The UN funding for development projects in the Third World countries would feel the pinch as emergency rescue packets for Indonesia, Thailand, South Korea, Russia and CIS would siphon away nearly USD300b (in phases). In India and Pakistan (market of one billion people) the aid cut-off would disturb economic stability, due to the 'crime' of testing devices for self-preservation. The Yen has gone down to 144, and seems to be rushing to the 150 mark to the dollar; Tokyo is feeling rather helpless, and Beijing and Korea are worried, as the recession in Japan is now official. Malaysia is trying to avoid USD transactions by resorting to barter arrangement. Singapore is worried as a financial hub. Problems also develop!

Bangladesh has got a chance to improve her exports and local foreign investments, subject to less political jitters, which is, unfortunately, not forthcoming. The fast on line service of Sangu gas from offshore is a creditable achievement. In contrast to the fires in the Sylhet gas fields. The adverse image of the latter episodes has to be cleared to the satisfaction of the public and the regime.

In the electricity sector, the lapse of delaying the BMREs cannot be condoned, regardless of professional excuses. The bridge over the Jamuna would result in a spurt of activities, some unforeseen as yet, with attendant infrastructure bottlenecks.

Anyway, it is too early to presume that Bangladesh would not feel the pinch of the diversion of 300 billion dollars.

A Husnain Dhaka

A mega city or a slum city?

Sir, Your second editorial titled "Slum-dwellers: Fading Smile", has been most timely telling us exactly what is the present position of Urban Poverty Reduction Project. This is such a crucially important project that this cannot even wait for a month.

In this case the Asian Development Bank quite reasonably had asked from the government a 10 year land guarantee, which has not been obtained so far. Because of the delay, there is every possibility that the ADB may withdraw its financial backing.

As of today, Dhaka has one of the worst slum population in the world, and with the rural migration, the condition is getting worse everyday. The resultant outcome would be that the whole of the Dhaka city will be unlivable. The problem of the availability of land has to be faced squarely and done with.

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PM's visit to India

Sir, Our PM's initiative to prevail upon the premiers of India and Pakistan to staunch further escalation between the two countries of animosity following experimental detonation of nuclear bombs is laudable. But we fail to understand the rationale of her going lock, stock and barrel. When foreign ministry top brass were all included in the entourage, what was the expediency to include both the ministers of foreign relations? We deem it mere extravagance for a pauper country like Bangladesh. Transparency cries in the wilderness.

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Promises...?

Sir, During the Pakistan day we were told by leaders that 80 per cent of income of the then East Pakistan was being taken away to the then West Pakistan. So if provincial autonomy on the basis of 6 per cent income would remain in the country and our people would be able to live very comfortably in place of autonomy Almighty Allah has given us complete independence and 26 years have passed after liberation. But our economic situation without improving as promised is going

from bad to worse. Prices of essentials and non-essentials have gone up manifold. Political parties are quarrelling and killing each other. They have made the country a hell for which they blame one another. Many political parties came to power in the last 26 years, but no political party could bring the desired economic emancipation. Each time a party comes to power with big promises never fulfils the same.

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The difference

Sir, I would like to draw your attention to the press release on EMDR, printed in the DS on 14th June. It was mistakenly mentioned that a panel of psychiatrists attended the press conference, but except Prof M A Shoban other three members of the panel were eminent psychologists. It should be noted that the backgrounds of psychologists and psychiatrists are totally different. The psychologists had their graduation on psychology, whereas the psychiatrists are doctors, who had specialisation on psychiatric disorders.

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Waiting for the doctor

Sir, A few years back a brother of mine had suffered severe pain in the skull. According to the doctor the pain was due to high blood pressure and partially due to the impact of the pressure on his head he had received while diving in a swimming pool on compulsory official training. Thank God that there was no sign of clots. However, the attending doctors had repeatedly warned him for prompt medical attention on the slightest recurrence of pain.

Recently my brother was again complaining of similar pain, therefore, I had to rush for an urgent appointment with a reputed surgeon at a clinic in Maghbazar. As soon as I reached the clinic, the attendant informed me "not before 22nd of August, '98". These doctors are hard-to-get.

Now what about the serious patients? Can they afford to wait 60 to 90 days for a doctor's attention?

May I draw the attention of our respected doctors in this respect?

Khawaja Viqar Moinuddin Purana Pallan, Dhaka

OPINION

Plight of Bangladeshi Migrant Workers

by Shahzada M Akram

Thousands of migrant workers form Bangladesh go to Malaysia every year with the hope of bringing change in the economic condition of their families. These workers go to foreign land with legal documents or through illegal contacts. They all share a common dream of improving their economic status. But in many cases the reality they are faced with is quite shocking and totally unexpected both to them and their families in Bangladesh.

According to the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training document, 66,631 migrant workers were working in Malaysia in 1996. Malaysian human rights groups, however, claimed that the total number of documented and undocumented Bangladeshi migrant worker in Malaysia is as high as 306,000.

Migrant workers face innumerable problems both in Bangladesh and in Malaysia. Some of these problems faced by migrant workers in the host country includes, harassment by Malaysian law enforcing agencies, condition of detention camps and the role of Bangladesh High Commission in Malaysia. These problems so far have not been properly addressed by the government nor by the human rights groups working in this field.

In recent years, Bangladeshi migrant workers have become targets of Malaysian law enforcing agencies. Quite often the law enforcing officials demand that the workers provide them with their papers. In many cases, as alleged, the undocumented workers get away from being penalised by paying bribes. There have been instances when legal workers produced their papers, but those were torn and thrown away by the police. In this way, the workers are made undocumented. In most cases, these workers do not have any copy of the papers and they cannot provide evidence of their valid residency. This results in being taken to the police station. Often their belongings, valuable and personal things are retained by the authorities. In the police stations, they are often subjected to inhuman treatments. This includes denying them adequate food and subjecting them to physical vio-

lence. Moreover, it is further alleged by some returnee workers that these workers do not get access to legal advice.

Sheikh Nasir Ahmed, a returnee migrant worker who spent time in Malaysian jails, narrated the plight of the Bangladeshi migrant workers in jails and detention camps. The workers without proper documents usually have to spend 5-7 days in the police custody following their arrest. Later, after they are sentenced, they are sent to the detention camps which much resemble the second world war concentration camps.

Usually these detention camps are 300-400 kilometres away from the towns, situated in deep forests. Each detention camp is two storied with corrugated iron roof and surrounded by barbed wire fence. The detainees are subjected to physical abuse. They have to remain standing in open fields for 4 to 5 hours at a stretch in a very hot and humid weather, crawl over rough paths with sharp pebbles, and carry out every impossible orders like climbing a tall tree. Otherwise, they are severely beaten and tortured. Quite often the detainees suffer from dehydration, have torn elbows and knees, and are denied medical care. Each detainee is given inadequate amount of food — one or two slices of bread and a cup of tea in the morning, a small amount of rice and vegetables at lunch, and similar meal for dinner. Egg or meat is given once a week. The effect of such malnourishing food is evident in the loss of their body weight.

It is alleged that some inmates lose 10 to 15 pounds within the first week of their imprisonment. The wards where inmates are kept are overcrowded. The number of people accommodated in wards are 4 to 5 times more than the normal capacity. The sanitation and personal health care facilities are also very poor. The whole situation is undoubtedly inhuman. Under such conditions inmates are brutalised within a very short period. The prisoners fight over food with other fellow workers.

In such conditions, diseases are frequent and hardly any healthcare service is available. Any protest against the condi-

tions is ignored and sometimes is met with violence. The administration is hardly accountable. On the day of monthly inspection of the camp by the Malaysian government authorities, adequate food is supplied to the prisoners. Should the inspector receive any complaint, the camp administration tries to identify the complainant. If they succeed, the complainant is severely dealt with.

"I was very careful not to make any complaint or show discontent," Hazrat Ali, a returnee worker narrated his experience of camp life. "But somehow the official from the governmental inspection team identified our problems and mentioned it in his report. The detention camp authority turned simply wild like anything to look for the person who was inspected by the inspection team."

Some of the workers have been very critical about the role of the Bangladesh High Commission at Kuala Lumpur. Hardly any support is provided to reduce the sufferings of the migrant workers. The High Commission is not very active in keeping record of the migrant workers. Its activities also get undermined by bureaucratic red-tapism. It has been alleged that the officials are insensitive to their plights. Some returnee workers further alleged that these officials develop an unholy alliance with the supervisors or production managers of the companies against which the workers register their complaints.

Till today, the Government of Bangladesh has done little to improve the condition of the migrant workers who have left their homes not for luxury but out of sheer poverty and lack of local employment opportunity. Recently a talk has been held between the two governments on the issue. It is expected that the magnitude of harassment and torture in the detention camps will be reduced. There must be a proper policy for the protection of Bangladeshi citizens — to ensure their dignity, safety and welfare in foreign lands.

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