

Is Bhutan Passing through Uneasy Times?

by Barrister Harun ur Rashid

Unless the sensitive issue of the Indian insurgents hiding in Bhutan is handled with great care, the Indo-Bhutanese relations could be under strain and it might have an impact in the countries in the region.

ALTHOUGH Bhutan's King Jigme Singye Wanchuk has initiated political reforms in June this year, Bhutan's international standing was put into question when its largest minority Hindus of Nepali origin became refugees in Nepal. Bhutan defends its policies as necessary to preserve the Buddhist country from the non-citizens but Human Rights monitors perceive this treatment to the people of Nepali origin who lived for generations in Bhutan as violation of their human rights. Bhutan has developed an uneasy relationship on this issue with its neighbour - Nepal, the Himalayan Hindu Kingdom.

Bhutan has a population of about 600,000 and it is reported that over 90,000 people of Nepali origin had to leave Bhutan and South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre in a report this month blames Bhutan for lack of progress in repatriation of the refugees now living in overcrowded camps in neighbouring Nepal. However Bhutan has launched a diplomatic initiative to invite the Amnesty International and other non-government groups in the country to see the situation of human rights. Bhutan claims that it has nothing to hide.

On another front, Bhutan appears to have a problem with India. India is reported to have requested Bhutan to allow In-

dian security forces to cross into Bhutan to pursue the Indian rebels in Bhutan's territory. Ordinarily the rebels would take shelter across the border in Bhutan from the Indian north eastern states when chased by the Indian law-enforcing agencies. Bhutan is placed in an uncomfortable situation as it does not want any violation of its sovereignty by the Indian security forces nor does it wish to annoy India. It argues, according to media reports, that it will ensure that no rebels find Bhutan "a heaven" for insurgency.

Bhutan and India are parties to the Indo-Bhutan Agreement which provides India to have a say in the foreign relations of Bhutan. It is an agreement which the British had with Bhutan till 1947. Bhutan is a land-locked country and its trade with the neighbouring countries involves the transit through Indian territory and unless India gives transit rights, it will be difficult for Bhutan to sustain and promote bilateral trade with the countries in the region. From this point of view Bhutan appears to be economically vulnerable to external forces.

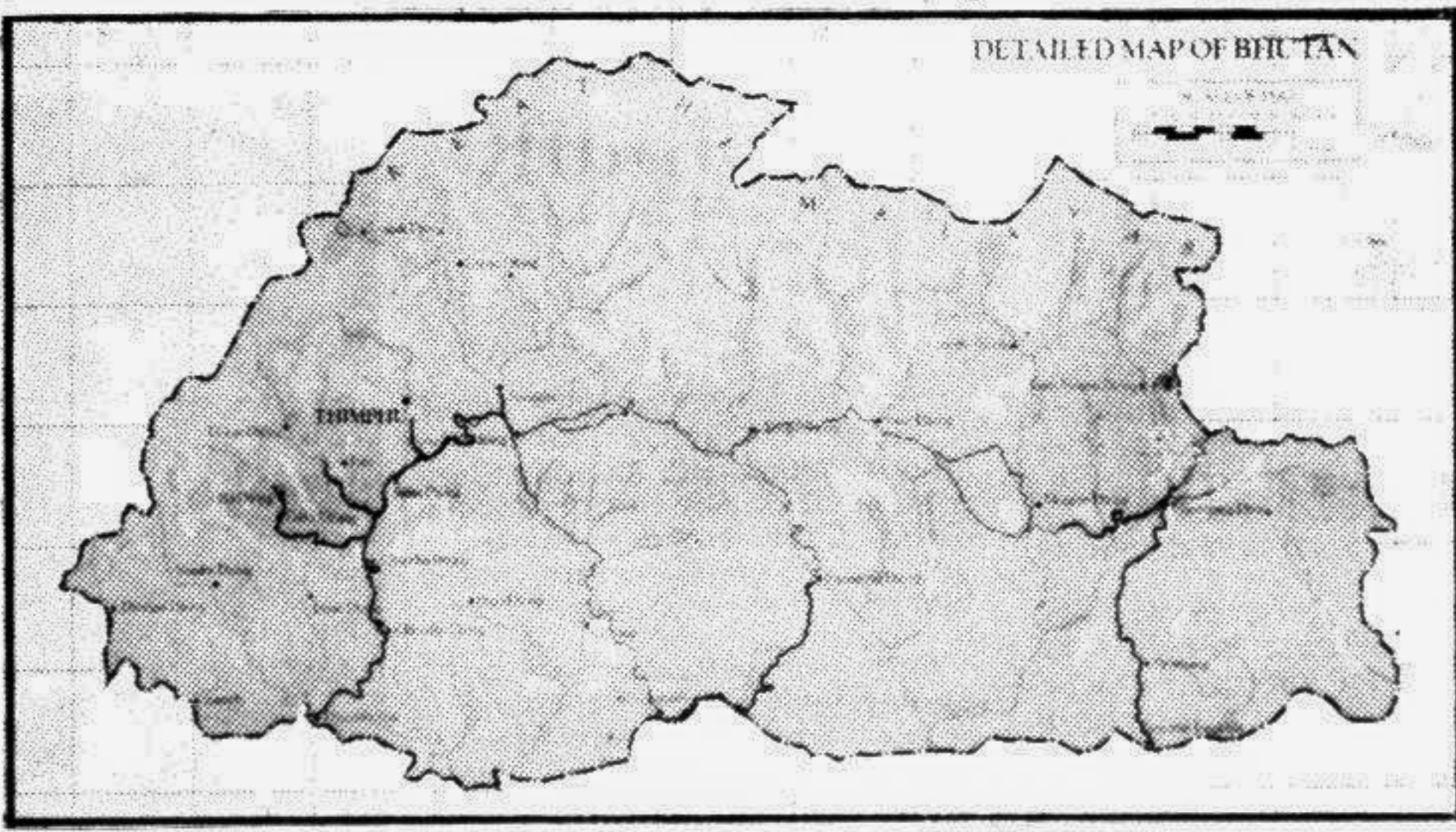
The Indian rebels live in sensitive areas which have borders with China and Burma and a few of the militant rebels have turned into "separatists" and they operate from the bases across the borders including

southern Bhutan. From Indian security perspective, observers believe that Bhutan falls within its perimeter and India could argue that it has rights to undertake "hot-pursuits" in the Bhutan's territory for its security interests. On the other hand it could be argued that such exercise of right impinges the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Bhutan and can only be executed with the consent of Bhutan.

In my view, the time has come for the countries in the north eastern region in the Indian sub-continent to confront to the special menace posed by the insurgents. Their attacks on the institutions that underpin the free and civil society must be repelled. They should embrace the democratic path to fulfil their aspirations. The example of the Peace Agreement made with Chakma leaders by the Bangladesh government in the Chittagong Hill Tracts on 2nd December 1997 is an instance in point.

Unless the sensitive issue of the Indian insurgents hiding in Bhutan is handled with great care, the Indo-Bhutanese relations could be under strain and it might have an impact in the countries in the region. We hope this issue does not get out of control from its diplomatic endeavours.

The writer is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN in Geneva.



The Post-flood Period: Still Too Early to Celebrate

by Syed M Hashemi and Intiaz Ahmed

Government officials at the local level, along with NGO field workers, have remained sincere and committed. Their hard work, often day and night, have been responsible for ensuring resource access for the most vulnerable. It is still too early however to celebrate. The next few months, at least till the Boro rice crop has been planted, will continue to be difficult. We must remain vigilant, at least till then.

ALL available evidence, to date, indicates that we may yet successfully emerge from the worst floods of this century. Of course this is fundamentally due to the resilience of the poor, their tenacity in the face of all odds, and their ability to cooperate and take initiatives rather than wait for governmental or external assistance to bail them out.

Our success in confronting the post-flood crisis is also due to governmental efforts, NGO actions and citizens initiatives, often in the form of a lone housewife spending her savings and her time to cook for a hundred flood-affected destitute. We have successfully managed to contain a diarrhoea epidemic. Though deaths from diarrhoea and water borne diseases have occurred, the numbers are minimal, given the magnitude of the flooding. This is a direct result of painstaking work over the years by governmental agencies and NGOs for the promotion of safe drinking water and use of Oral Rehydration Saline against diarrhoea.

People in the most remote villages know that they must drink tubewell water or boil their water or use alum to purify their water. They know that in the event of diarrhoea they must use ORS or make their own or at least drink plenty of water so that they don't dehydrate. This awareness has finally paid off in ensuring that deaths remained minimal. We were able to combat the floods also due to the heightened consciousness regarding against any lapses in relief distribution and rehabilitation efforts. This continuous monitoring at every level, from national opposition political parties to citizens' groups to landless agricultural laborers in remote villages, has ensured that, for the most part, relief and rehabilitation efforts have been corruption-free.

Another vindication for the thesis, following Amartya Sen, is that a conscious democratic polity disallows famines. Government officials at the local level, along with NGO field workers, have remained sincere and committed. Their hard work, often day and night, have been responsible for ensuring resource access for the most vulnerable. It is still too early however to celebrate. The next few months, at least till the Boro rice crop has been planted, will continue to be difficult. We must remain vigilant, at least till then.

Nagorik Durjog-Mokabilla Uddyog, a national citizens' initiative convened by Professor Rehman Sobhan, has collected information from ordinary citizens, from NGO workers and through field visits. The Uddyog has also conducted a twenty thousand village survey with the assistance of field workers of Grameen Bank, BRAC, Proshika, GSS, Nijera Kori, OXFAM and others. This incidentally was a voluntary effort and was done free of cost. The information coming in from all these sources point to specific concerns at the ground level. The following is a brief statement of these concerns.

Identification of the Most Vulnerable Areas
While the floods have devastated many areas in Bangladesh it is important to identify the most vulnerable areas for policy interventions. This vulnerability is defined not merely in terms of flood devastation but in terms of the recovery potentials of such areas. For example, a badly flood affected area may, because of the capacity of the local economy and its linkages with urban areas, be able to recover from the flood problems relatively easily. However economically depressed areas with relatively less flood devastation may find it extremely difficult to recover from the crisis. Based on poverty maps of the World Food Program and identification of famine prone areas from BIDS studies, Binayak Sen of BIDS came up with a list of 12 thanas which were felt to be the most vulnerable. The Nagorik Durjog-Mokabilla Uddyog then sent teams to determine at the ground level both the damages and recovery potential of these areas. Based on such field reports and reports from Atur Rahman from BIDS, Salehuddin Ahmed of PKSF, Salehuddin Ahmed of BRAC, FRM Hassan of GSS, Khushi Kabir of Nijera Kori and others, we came up with a list of specific unions in 17 thanas which we feel are the most vulnerable. While this list may be incomplete, it is the starting point for defining specific areas where immediate interventions

should be targeted.
Distribution of VGF Cards
VGF Card distribution has started in most areas. A few issues need to be considered in VGF card distribution.
The generalized across the country distribution of VGF card has meant that many places, where the flood devastation may not be acute, have received similar number of card relative to intensely hit areas. This has meant that in some areas VGF cards have gone to people who may not be in desperate need, while many people in desperate conditions have not received cards. It is important therefore to target the most vulnerable areas only for such fresh VGF allocations.

There is an economic argument suggesting that VGF cards and the corresponding free distribution of grain may create market distortions and production disincentives. While this is correct and should serve as a cautionary note against arbitrary expansion of free grain distribution, it should also be noted that there is a specific need for safety net programmes for the most destitute. Our field reports indicate, for example, that in Roumari thana 18,000 VGF card are required but only 7,000 have been distributed. Similarly, in Chilmari thana about 17,000 cards are needed but only 7,400 cards distributed.

We therefore suggest that VGF card allocation be contingent on the following criteria:
VGF cards be targeted to the most vulnerable areas, the worst flooded areas and areas that are suffering from riverbank erosion.
Information for identification of VGF card recipients be collected, as far as possible, from the village level. The TNO's office should work closely with the Union Parishads and local NGOs and local citizens groups for identifying the destitute. Political pressure should be avoided at all cost.

Old, infirm people, female headed households, disabled people, homeless people, the most destitute living on one meal a day, should receive the highest priority in VGF card distribution.
Transportation costs for distribution of food grains should be covered.
Test Relief
Here again the allocation of food grain is inadequate in relation to demand. For example in Roumari 93 metric tons of grain have been allocated, while the requirement is for 300 metric tons. In Chilmari the demand is for 400 metric tons but only 82 metric tons have been allocated. In test relief distribution it should be mandatory that test relief grain cannot be encashed, as has been the practice in the past, for contribution to schools, madrasahs, clubs, etc. Test relief must be used for direct employment generation.
It may be mentioned that the need for test relief remains critical, particularly in the most vulnerable areas, for another two months, that is, November and December. Given the urgency and the slowness of governmental bureaucracy, it would be wise for NGOs to takeover the task of test relief, of course without limiting it to their respective members. If additional fund is required to start such cash-for-work programme, NGOs ought to begin negotiating with the government or even the donors.

Agricultural Credit
The disbursement of agricultural credit is slow and inadequate. It is not being channeled to small and marginal farmers. It is also heard that agricultural credit disbursement may not be corruption free. Given the magnitude of the work, we believe that the government would do better if it involves some NGOs to disburse such loans.

Crop Seeds and Livestock Feed
There is a serious scarcity of livestock feed. In many regions farmers are trying to grow an aman crop even though the rice output will be minimal. At least they will get the grain stalk for cattle feed. There is also a serious crisis of crop seeds.

Micro Credit Activities
Microcredit operations have effectively channeled funds to flood affected people to sustain themselves through this crisis. During the floods micro credit workers were seen on boats to ensure that weekly contacts with all members were maintained. Workers carried money with them and provided immediate interest-free consumption loans so that members would not go hungry. Repayments were deferred in the flood-affected areas. Access to savings was provided. In the case of Grameen Bank, for example, members took out up to 90% of their group fund savings. BRAC, Grameen and others provided fresh loans and rescheduled repayments so that there would be no additional burden on members. Micro-credit activities, through pumping in money and supporting income-earning activities, have also contributed to a revival of local markets.

Microcredit organizations are however desperate for funds. They are seeking loans to enable them to disburse the extra loans they need to make out because of the floods. It is imperative that access to loans to micro credit operators be provided. Salehuddin Ahmed of PKSF has conducted an exercise and determined that there is a need for about Taka 9.2 billion to meet the additional credit requirements of micro credit organizations.
Winter Clothing
Many people have lost their houses because of the floods. This coupled with the low nutritional levels during this period will make people extremely vulnerable to the cold winter. We need to immediately act to ensure that not a single person should be affected by the 1998 deluge is over. But then, the specter of the next one hangs over us all. Are we all prepared to meet a deluge of this magnitude all over again? We think that the time has come to ponder on this issue seriously.
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Rational Investment and Economic Development in Bangladesh

by Tayeb Husain

We need to direct our investment to village based industries which, if sincerely undertaken and successfully implemented, will produce goods and services that our own people need for their welfare and simple living with dignity.

Investment policy of a government is very important for the economic development and welfare of a country. Since Bangladesh emerged as an independent and sovereign state in 1971 she has invested, mostly by borrowing, millions of dollars in different projects keeping in mind the above tradition of economic prudence. As a result the country has made some progress in real economic terms. New roads and highways, new bridges and dams, fashionable buildings in Dhaka and other major towns and thousands of foreign cars on the streets and alleys in the capital city bear the ample proofs of Bangladesh's economic progress.

But the paradox is, if someone looks very carefully to the real life in Bangladesh, the socio-economic situation in the country is much more desperate and frustrating today than it was ever before. The reason is again very simple. Only an insignificant percentage of our society has benefited remarkably by economic development the country has made since independence. Allegedly crook politicians, their cronies and corrupt bureaucrats belong to this percentage of people. Another small percentage of our ordinary population also got a little but the rest gained nothing.

The situation would have been different if our investment policy was proper at national and local levels and if due consideration was given to our national interest at large. What went wrong in our investment policy? While discussing the issues concerned, we are not providing a complete prescription to the known problems but trying to highlight certain visible areas where priorities can be established for an overall development. In general, we are talking about creating a basis for the infrastructure of the economy as it is never too late to lay out a plan of action. Basic needs are stressed from the scratch level as we see that a massive project is often not at all beneficial for an impoverished country as Bangladesh is.

The source of investment capitals in Bangladesh is mostly foreign aid. Our politicians, bureaucrats and the whole state machinery always had been busy to grab this foreign aid primarily to enrich themselves first and then use in any randomly selected projects at hand without considering or thoroughly reviewing any alternative or other options that could be called better investment programmes. Foreign experts and foreign investors found out and evaluated our investment needs and our governing machinery worked as "go between" only in most of the cases. The result of this gave birth to corrupt activities in the investment process.

There are numerous incidents investment projects in both public and private sector in Bangladesh that were initiated by crooks with sole objective of plundering public fund and getting rich quickly.

Politicians and their cronies also borrowed money from banks without any collateral. It is bitter but truth of the matter that the swindlers in Bangladesh have destroyed the investment and business environment in cooperation with politicians, bureaucrats and bank officials. This unhealthy situation in the country is known to everybody but nothing has been done by any quarter to stop this malpractice. Punishing the swindlers of investment capital is also impossible as they have strong political connections. Grabbing money by such unfair means and taking bribes and getting rich seems to be well accepted in Bangladesh. Thus, one must sadly conclude that, the country has to live with the prevailing situation and adjust her investment policy accordingly.

What is Bangladesh's major problem and what should have been the rational investment policy here, in spite of all the great irregularities in the administrative system to channel properly the investment capital? That is what is needed to be explained and clarified.

Needless to mention that Bangladesh's primary problem is poverty. The overpopulation appears to cause this poverty, but it needs further clarification. Every individual has two hands and can produce, even in worst situation, much more than he or she needs. Indeed population can be also a great asset if it is used in a productive manner. Holland is slightly behind Bangladesh in population per unit area. The mass in Holland is used very efficiently with various productive goals and thus, it is one of the rich countries on earth. Overpopulation is not necessarily a cause of poverty but bad governance and mismanagement are. Anyway, that is not what we are going to discuss now. Let us consider what should have been our investment policy to eradicate poverty and to maintain sustainable development from the outset of Bangladesh's emergence as a sovereign state.

Any sensible government in Bangladesh should have taken poverty eradication as their prime objective with number one priority. First and foremost it should have been investment aiming at total eradication of poverty. To eradicate poverty in Bangladesh it can be possible again by investing, sequentially and concurrently, in the following sectors: (1) Flood Control, (2) Agriculture, Livestock, and Fisheries, (3) Housing and Health-care, (4) Education.

Investment in Flood Control: The survival of Bangladesh depends largely on effective flood control. All these years governments used flood in the country as an excuse to seek and get foreign aid. Flood control is a gigantic task but still the country can get this job done if and when a sincere and benevolent government undertakes such a massive responsibility seriously as on war footing. There are various theories as how to control flood in Bangladesh. Some suggest of

building massive embankments around the river systems while some advise of landscaping for dwelling and living with the flood. Whatever the suggestion, investment in flood control must be the number one priority and we must control flood ourselves at any cost. It is indeed deplorable that no government in Bangladesh considered investment in flood control their most important programme as yet.

It is noteworthy that China has controlled her perennial floods in less than six years after Mao Tse-Tung established his government in 1949. China never got any aid from the western countries. Their skilled and unskilled labourers were the prime resources to get the job done. This nation started progressing with self-sufficiency in food and other agricultural products long time ago. Recent flood in China, one can say, puts a question mark on the Chinese success. But let us not forget, China herself will find a way out.

Investment in Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries: Investment in agriculture, livestock and fisheries should be the next top priority. Land reform and investment in mechanisation of agriculture should follow simultaneously. We need tractors, organised and strong labour force and excellent planning for food production. The ailing and hungry cattle should be replaced by efficient tractors. We must invest in livestock and cattle farms for our meat, milk, butter, leather, etc. It is a question of proper planning with little investment under skilled supervision. Planned horticulture and subsequent investment in it should be another priority. Poultry farming all over Bangladesh must be encouraged and capital for investment must be available in this sector. Another most important investment should be in fisheries. We must invest and encourage people to cultivate fish throughout the country.

Crimes and disorder in the country are due to wrong or no planning and people are loitering everywhere without any constructive job to do. Is it impossible to organise these people and put them into meaningful activities, such as raising land for their own dwelling houses and digging ponds for fish production? Free tractors should be available in each village for productive activities.

Investment in Rural Housing and Health-care: The next important priority for investment should be in rural housing and a minimum health-care. The villages must be organised and dwelling houses must be constructed in land-raised plots with ponds for each and every family for fish production and a small plot attached to it for producing vegetables. Population of 3/4 adjacent villages must be unified in small township so that each inch of land can be regained for large agricultural activities under strong and honest leadership. Let us have a productive colonel in each village rather than keeping this gentleman unproductive in Dhaka garrison. The task seems very difficult and in theoretical context extremely radical, but do we have any other choice? If something is not done immediately to check the situation now, the future of

our nation seems to be doomed for ever.
Investment in Education: Investment in flood control is to save the country physically, investment in agriculture, housing etc. is for survival and investment in education is for a meaningful living. By education one need not conclude or connote it to university degrees. An education system is needed by which young generation can earn a strong capability to write, read, and understand things correctly. The basic education system looks rotten and primary education is completely ruined. What is the meaning in establishing 'Bangabandhu Medical University' without having a proper understanding or significance of such a university? Similar logic applies to the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology. What was wrong with the Dhaka University having 10 or, if necessary, 50 faculties? Our professors are engaged in unhealthy politics rather than imparting knowledge to their students. Most of these gentlemen prefer to be heads or deans than doing constructive activities such as research or writing thesis or teaching students to create a cadre of personnel needed by the industries

or relevant institutions. University teachers offer private tuition and that seems to be a priority of their job. We have no knowledge of university teachers in any other society.
The University students as of today, again, appear to be the arms cadres, of political parties and are also blamed as rapists. The young generation are thus engaged in ruining themselves. Bangladesh, most probably, will be better off without these Universities! Madrasah education in Bangladesh is another example of our stupidity with education as it is a foolishness if offered our young generation such a discriminatory education that has little practical use in our society?
A fresh probing is needed in order to concentrate in the basic education. A reasonably good educational standard must be developed. The decision makers must invest and make sure that job training and education go together. Rejuvenating the education system utilising public concerns and participation requires complete elimination of politics and political elements from the educational institutions. A complete programme, must be imposed as how the current diseases in the academic environment can be cured. Installation of the educated within the government machinery is not the prescription for this disease. The permanent drug to cure this disease is to employ sincere cooperation from all the influential political parties of the country so that indulging young generation in education is accelerated instead of making an armed cadre of criminals.

Erroneous Investments in Bangladesh: Constructing many roads and highways in Bangladesh was very practical. But what for we need these roads and highways? For the destruction of the agricultural land and the ecological system? How many cars or buses or trucks or other transport vehicles use these roads and highways? These roads and highways cannot be used fully as the economic power of the massive population is limited to procure cars and other vehicles. Even if the economy turns good random cars and trucks must not be allowed to ply on these roads due to the simple fact that it pollutes the environment. The country should concentrate on building railway system, strong and effective, instead of spending meagre resources on these roads. Again, can we afford to keep these roads and highways functional throughout the year? It gets damaged easily by the heavy downpour and due to frequent floods. We should have invested to build our main railways from Cox's Bazar to Khulna and from Dinajpur to Sylhet including many other auxiliary lines and destinations connecting the whole country. Investment to use electricity to run the railway system would have been an excellent scheme. Therefore, generation of power from the natural gases would have been a viable route to resolve potential problems.

Twenty-five Parties Jostle for Power in Nigeria

The party lines are being drawn in Nigeria for the elections for a civilian government which will take place from December to February 1999. Many old guard politicians are coming back into the scene, but new ones and new parties and alliances are forming and reforming. Gemini News Service reports on the scramble for power

Lekan Otufodunrin writes from Lagos

TWENTY-five groups of politicians are jostling to register as parties to take part in the four-stage elections planned to move Nigeria from military to civilian rule early next year.

All have submitted the registration forms and fee of 100,000 naira in time to meet the deadline set by the Independent National Election Commission (INEC).

About 150 groups emerged after the announcement of the transition programme, but only 32 actually collected registration forms.
One of the most prominent groups is the All Peoples Party (APP). Critics say the acronym really stands for the Abacha People's Party because of the preponderance in its membership of leading supporters of General Sani Abacha, the last president.
Abacha died last June before his plan to become a civilian and succeed himself could materialise. He had created five unrepresentative parties to bring this about.
When General Abdulsalam Abubakar succeeded Abacha he

quickly scrapped the five parties and authorised the restoration of normal party systems.

Despite the blot on its image of the Abacha connection, the APP is likely to be given provisional registration by the Commission when the names are announced on 19 October. The party is led by an old-guard politician and senator from the second republic, Alhaji Mahmud Waziri.
The Commission had to extend the time limit for party registration because of what its chairman, retired Justice Ephraim Akpata, described as "passionate calls" by political associations to give them time to meet the complex registration guidelines, which are regarded as stiff.

For Nigeria the elections are going to be a difficult exercise. The country, which became independent in 1960, has had only two terms of civilian rule totalling ten years while the other 28 years have been spent under military rule.
Besides the APP, other groups expected to scale the registration hurdle include the People's Democratic Party

(PDP), led by former civilian government Chief Solomon Lar; the National Democratic Movement (NDM), headed by Professor Emmanuel Osamor; and the Alliance for Democracy (AD), led by Ambassador Jolly Tanko Yusuf. All three leaders have kept well clear of the military governments of recent years.

To get provisional registration, each group must set up a national headquarters in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), and maintain functional branches in at least 24 of the country's 36 states.
A further hurdle comes at the local government elections on 5 December when parties must poll at least 10 per cent of the total number of votes cast in at least 24 states of the federation.

At a meeting with a UN fact-finding delegation on 30 September the parties jointly called for the discontinuation of the registration of parties. They said associations which obtained registration should be allowed to contest all the elections.
This, they said, would allow

for the voluntary emergence of strong parties and ensure that the weak ones faded out.

For now, the People's Consultative Forum (PCF) remains the beautiful bride for the election. Its membership is made up largely of the Southern-dominated opposition group, the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) which pulled out of APP to form the Alliance for Democracy (AD). The group is being wooed by the APP and the PDP.

Against the background of the campaign to shift power to the South after the succession of rulers from the north, the AD seems determined to bid for power, despite its lack of national spread, and could stop southern votes going to other parties.
Until the last minute, opportunities for mergers with meetings and consultations continue between the various groups. In Nigerian politics, anything can happen.
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