Unhelpful Rigidity

OPPOSITION leader Begum Khaleda Zia has spurned Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's offer for talks on some 'specific demands.' Her rejection sounded extremely abrasive because she said she would have a dialogue with the government but solely for the purpose of working out its resignation and not for resolving any differences with it. She has communicated all this to US Ambassador John C Holzman who, while calling on her on Tuesday, wanted to know her reaction to the PM's latest offer for a dialogue. As if to leave no room for ambiguity about her inflexibility she has gone a step further adding if the offer were officially made she would be ready to discuss modalities for implementing her demand for the government's instant resignation. Her determination to carry on with oust-the-government-movement through intensified agitations has been reiterated in no unmistakable terms.

If the opposition leader's response to the PM's latest dialogue offer has been so caustic because of the Prime Minister's critical pointer to her 'confusing demands' then one has to say that this is a dangerous overreaction.

Why should the ruling party be participating in a dialogue that would be solely geared to addressing the agenda of its undoing and self-liquidation? We are concerned about this no-holds-barred obduracy on the part of the principal opposition party leader. When the BNP was in power the opposition AL had stuck to its one-point demand seeking resignation of the incumbent government but everybody remembers it too well that the then BNP government could serve its term of office despite AL's threat. BNP is playing the reverse role now in asking for the ouster of the AL government but the latter will not be toppled just for the asking as the 1991-96 BNP government was not.

By pressing for such unconstitutional and unrealistic demand what the BNP is precipitating is chaos and instability in the country. What is bound to happen is more hartal and more anarchy. We urge them, therefore, to pull back from the brink of an imminent politico-economic disaster. Instead, they should talk electoral reform and the forthcoming local self-government polls to participate in them.

Endangered Tanguar Haor

ON paper, the Tanguar Haor along the border in Sunamganj is an ecologically critical area (ECA). Moreover, a ministry of environment and forest proposal to declare the 9725-hectare wetland, an abode for some 250 species of the animaldom, a Ramsar site, was submitted to the prime minister's office last week. Also, the ministry has written letters to the land and local government ministries, and others concerned "for retaining the wetland's status as ECA and not to renew a lease which expired last December." Unfortunately, the reality is: some influential people with blessing from political high-ups have the land ministry under serious pressure to get their files on leasing of the haor cleared. In case the land ministry do approve renewal of the lease, which remains a strong possibility, it would only herald a disaster for the wetland. In a haste to get their money's worth before the government declares it a Ramsar site, the lessee, as put by an International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) expert, "would be tempted to reap a quick harvest in the dry season going for part by part draining of the wetland and catch all the fish."

According to a study report done by the National Conservation Strategy, the wetland would lose its natural character if leased out for indiscriminate fishing. Already, there has been a sharp decline in fish population due to over-fishing. Besides, depletion of reed and swamp forest also threatens endangered birds like the Pallas's Eagle. Leasing out of the wetland would not only expose the 17 species of fish to the risk of extinction but also threaten the country's lone surviving swamp forest of hijal, karach, gunjikanta and chhongrass.

As a signatory to the Ramsar Convention which seeks better conservation of the wetlands worldwide, the government must make sure that the haor does not fall victim to human greed. The land ministry should by no means renew the lease. We hope the prime minister would declare the Tanguar Haor a Ramsar site soon and issue directive to the ministry concerned for an integrated conservation plan.

Corruption in District Hospitals

ANOTHER batch of forty employees, of the health department, including civil surgeons and others, has been recommended for punishment by the parliamentary sub-committee on completion of their investigation into their conduct. A report in an influential Bangla daily had revealed instances of corruption in the offices of civil surgeons in many district-towns of the country. A similar report by the sub-committee saw around thirty employees of the health department, including six civil surgeons, losing their jobs on corruption charges.

In the first phase, this committee investigated allegations of corruption in the utilisation of funds in 17 districts and found discrepancies in the expenditure in Jessore, Bagerhat, Sherpur, Patuakhali and Munshiganj. In the second phase, investigations were carried out in some other districts and malpractices were detected between 1996 and 98 in Satkhira, Gopalganj, Faridpur, Madaripur, Rangpur and Tangail. The report says that the allegations proved correct in the second phase were almost similar to those for which a number of civil surgeons and other officials and employees had lost their jobs in the first phase. The 'selection committee' in these hospitals purchased medical and surgical appliances and equipment and furniture at unbelievable prices in collusion with a bunch of unscrupulous officials at the health and finance ministries who moved the files with the speed of lightning and got the financial sanctions and approvals in place.

We highly commend the good work done by the parliamentary sub-committee and urge the government to take stern measures against the offenders. The government should try to recover the stolen money from the culprits through legal means.

For Whom are Our Cities?

by Dr Shayer Ghafur

In events like slum eviction, the development agenda of the urban poor is lost to different vested interests. Rather than subjects of development, the urban poor become the objects of development (for others) without any say in the affairs that aim to change their life.

IN a rapidly urbanising world, 'Cities for All' was the theme for this year's World Habitat Day. The theme was 'dedicated to all urban residents who are excluded from enjoying the benefits of urban life, either because their physical, social or economic condition does not allow them to participate in urban activities, or because they are not legally or politically recognised as citizens of the cities in which they live'. This dedication takes place in a reality of wider inequality and exclusion affecting the lives and livelihoods of a large number of urban dwellers, especially in developing countries. While rest of the world observed this event with greater conviction, promise and vision to improve the conditions of these deprived people, (despite ritual rhetoric) we remain humiliated due to an act of our own: eviction of thousands of slum dwellers in Dhaka.

In the context of eviction-rehabilitation debate, the questions relative to the city and to 'urban reality' are not fully known and recognised. In Bangladesh, the 'urban question' is never confronted in a culture of 'power-project-profit'. This is seldom addressed in a conspiracy of silence. When addressed, it wanders from a sterile discussion of high 'housing deficit'/'room occupancy' to megalomaniac 'mile-square settlement grid' proposal. In the light of this year's theme — Cities for All — the pertinent foundational question is for whom are our cities? This would direct future actions. Without this, the least we need is a long list of socially unresponsive policy prescriptions, and display of dubious technical solutions. We had enough of them. Without a deeper understanding of our urban reality, sadly, we continue repeating the same mistakes.

Rethinking Cities

Cities have attained an added significance in an age of globalisation. Cities attract mobile international capital for investment in the formal sector; this then creates a context for the rich to accumulate wealth. It's greater linkages with the informal sector, to benefit the poor, remains a dream. Seen from a different perspective, cities also provide settings for a centralised administration, in particular, in developing countries: a spatial setting from which to perpetuate political hegemony (of ruling party) and distribute patronage. Recognising the significance of city as a source of power and wealth, inter and intra class alliances/conflicts most often take place to control and have access to its limited resources. Various urban administrations serve the cause of the elite and powerful sections of society; an unholy alliance exists between the authorities and vested interest groups. Use and abuse of policies, rules and regulations in practice, among others, are the tools for favour. The urban poor, without exceptions, have always been the deprived majority.

Preliminary findings of a recently concluded study, by a three-member team, which carried out a survey in 800 households in Dhaka state that per capita income of Dhaka dwellers has doubled in the last seven years (1991-1998) — from US$ 415 to US$ 843. A very good news indeed! But a closer scrutiny unfolds a different picture — an increasing gap between the rich and the poor. To describe how this increase in per capita income is not homogenous among all Dhaka dwellers, a few selected findings are summarised below:

- Income Figure: The average per capita income for all slum dwellers (with legal and illegal tenure) is a meagre US$ 253 while US$ 1110 is for the non-slum dwellers. In this period, the rates of increase among slum and non-slum dwellers are 6 and 11 per cent respectively.
- Income Share: In 1998, the lower 40 per cent households (determined on the basis of income) hold only 11 per cent of the total income generated in Dhaka. Whereas upper 10 per cent high-income households share 42 per cent of the generated income.
- Increasing Disparity: Despite increase in per capita income, gap between rich and poor is widening in Dhaka. The share of total income generated by the lower 40 per cent households came down to 11 per cent in 1998 from 17 per cent in 1991. Whereas, this figure for the upper 5 per cent households has almost doubled from 17 per cent to 31 per cent during this period.
- Reasons for Disparity: Less income from businesses and commerce and fixed assets contributed to half and one-fourth of all disparity respectively. Seeds of (urban) income disparity are embedded in the poor people's initial fixed asset disparity. In Dhaka, the lower 50 per cent households control only 7 per cent of all fixed assets. Whereas, the upper 5 per cent households control 40 per cent.

Despite these negative figures, an improvement in the magnitude of the urban poverty has been noticed. In 1998, 30 per cent of the Dhaka City population were estimated by this study to live below poverty level (i.e. 19% urban poor and 11% hardcore poor level). During 1991, this figure was 69 per cent (i.e. 42% urban poor and 27 hardcore poor). The change in figure implies that more than half of the urban poor came out of their poverty in seven years. Where do these people live? According to the findings of this study, 87 per cent of the urban poor live in slums and 19 per cent outside slums. How this improvement was made possible? The urban poor, women in particular, were targeted by different government and NGO interventions. Slum Improvement Project (SIP), an integrated basic service delivery initiative by the LGED is worth mentioning. This was acknowledged as the 'Best Practices' in Bangladesh by the Habitat II.

These facts and figures leave us to be critical of the view that sees slums only as dens of crime and violence — the alleged key reason for slum eviction.

Whose Good is Good?

In the event of state's repeated slum evictions, and its intention for rehabilitation through 'housing provision', will the poorer sections of the city be given a fair deal? Before addressing how good the eviction-affected groups: let us first understand what good these actions will bring to others. The following list is not exhaustive.

- General public will be benefited with an improvement in the overall crime situation. This is not a highly disputed proposition if we accept that slums and only slums are the dens of crime (I think).
- Eviction will put an end in the illegal consumption of public utilities and in turn, will benefit the taxpayers. True indeed if we establish that slum dwellers are the key culprits causing mammoth system loss to various public utilities.
- Eviction will result in the recovery of prime Khas urban land, resulting in public appropriation. We agree and hope that the eviction also takes place in areas controlled by the elements within the ruling party. We also hope that this act of recovery sets a precedence for the repossession of recently reported 364 acres of 'dis-possessed land in Dhaka. By repossession we do not mean selling those lands afterwards for shopping centres and apartments.
- There will be an improvement in the face of the city to the hygienic and aesthetic taste of the non-slum dwellers. But the question remains whether only the bastees and jhupries are restricting Dhaka towards becoming tilottoma.
- Relocation project arising from eviction will boost already booming (housing) construction sector. A good number of the urban poor will find their employment during construction of these flats. But can someone guarantee their allotment to, and continued living by the urban poor — the alleged beneficiaries or to following observations — defying the forces of gentrification?

We are quite confident to answer 'not-positive' regarding benefits of eviction and rehabilitation to the slum dwellers; hardly any case studies, inside-outside Bangladesh, exist that comply with these actions. This author addressed this issue before and will not repeat due to shortage of space ("Multistory Slums? Bad News for Petty-producers', The Daily Star (DS), 6.6.98). However, one particular citation is hard to resist.

In late 1974, the squatter population had reached a not-so-high 14 per cent of the urban population in Dhaka. In January 1975, 172,589 squatters were evicted. A housing expert lamented "By this time, other countries with similar and more serious squatter problems, were taking a more benevolent view. Bangladesh, however, enthusiastically pursued a series of misguided policies which were not only ineffective, but also alienated a large proportion of the low-income community. What became known as the Squatter Rehabilitation Programme, based on a number of resettlement camps located far to the periphery of economic opportunities within the informal sector, was at odds with earlier ideals and policies. Furthermore, they were totally in conflict with the lessons which were being learned internationally" (Charles L. Choguill, 1993).

We are witnessing a misjudged exercise that will consequently result in alienating a large number of the urban poor for the benefit of others. We are pursuing an urbanisation of injustice. One can rightly speculate that the eviction/rehabilitation will not benefit the urban poor people living in the margin dwell in properly serviced settlements, get good education and health facilities, sleep without fear of the mastans, and earn a gainful livelihood? And make a city for all. They should if they abide by the Constitutional provision of this country, commitments to various UN charters, and promises made by the political leaders. But the seat of power is unresponsive — our urban reality. Arrogance continues to defy all majoritarian causes and values, and accumulated knowledge during the last three decades.

Low-income housing in developing countries, is closely related to the concept of 'development'. Some 'core' development issues, e.g. employment generation, gender needs, and human rights, have been progressively placed at the forefront of 'housing' policies and strategies in addition to their previous 'shelter' emphasis. Low-income housing in a given developing country is a productive sector before being an emotive issue. This is an established fact. But in events like slum eviction, the development agenda of the urban poor is lost to different vested interests. Rather than subjects of development, the urban poor become the objects of development (for others) without any say in the affairs that aim to change their life. Slum dwellers become alien in their own country.

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Conclusion

While cities have been appropriated by the elite for power and profit-making on the one hand and highly subsidised residential plots on the other hand, access to means of enjoying (minimal) fruits of urban life has continued to elude the poor. There is a conscious attempt to exclude the poor as unworthy urban dwellers: they are poor, they live in unhygienic conditions and practices crime and violence.

If there exists a possibility where a group can improve though slowly, their natural condition by integrating into the urban dynamics: then where is the problem? Somebody's, whose problem? Should not the state, city authority, act in that case to create a responsive-setting for their betterment? Rationally and ideologically speaking, they should. But what we have been witnessing lately is a fallacy. The provider and protector accuse the victim (slum dwellers) for being poor and vulnerable! Isn't it their responsibility that poor people living in the margin dwell in properly serviced settlements...

The Website, the Widow and the War of Words

Whatever the Outcome of Polls Political Stability May Still Elude India

Computers are replacing graffiti, and colourful meetings are giving way to image consultants. But India's elections were still a heated affair. Gemini News Service went to the hustings to look at a campaign that was weak on policies and strong on personalities — particularly those of the two prospective prime ministers.

A cartoon in a national daily summed up the changes that have occurred in Indian electioneering: a half-clothed villager asks a parliamentary candidate, "Do you have a Website?"

The two main contenders for power — the 24-party National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the 114-year-old Indian National Congress — were wooing more than 600 million voters by using the latest image building techniques.

Most parties and leaders have their own Websites. But the real cyberwar was fought through scores of lesser-known sites, which were used to belittle opponents or spread malicious rumours.

The bigger role of computers is the other side of a coin that has seen a reduction in the noise and colour of Indian elections. Even posters and graffiti were less in evidence. The festival-like atmosphere was disappearing, largely as a result of the efforts of former Chief Election Commissioner TN Seshan. He was himself competing in the current election, taking on BJP strongman Lal Krishna Advani in Gujarat state.

Another sign of the times is that both the main political groupings had hired advertising and public relations specialists not only to prepare material for newspaper and magazine publicity and catchy phrases for television discussions, but even to advise the leaders on the choice of clothes to wear.

It was no accident or personal whim when BJP leader Atal Behari Vajpayee sported a colourful cricket cap at a public meeting, or when Italian-born Sonia Gandhi, who is attempting to take Congress along the road to recovery, wore a sari designed in the state where she was visiting.

Vajpayee campaigned in a typical kurta and dhoti, with a waistcoat to make him appear statesmanlike. It also gives echoes of the country's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru of Congress, whose waistcoat worn over a long shirt came to be known as the Nehru jacket.

And it was no longer the crowds at mass rallies that the politicians were trying to please. "More than for the gallery, our politicians are now playing for the television," said a media planner for a leading advertising company.

Money was no consideration in this battle for control of the 543-member Lok Sabha (lower house). It was widely reported that both sides had public relations budgets of 150 million rupees.

Both also had media moles,

D K Joshi writes from Delhi

India's election countdown

600m voters, 6,000 candidates and nearly 5m people involved in running the poll

CHINA · PAKISTAN · NEPAL · BHUTAN · New Delhi

Former Election Commission chief T.N. Seshan: Poll-tamer

who informed their paymasters of the text of their rivals' impending advertisements or announcements. This enabled counter-information to be prepared and distributed in an attempt to neutralise the original message.

Most of the image-making focused on the respective party leaders rather than on their parties. "You gave Congress 45 years," Vajpayee told voters, "give me just five."

The NDA relied on Vajpayee's image as the Prime Minister who 'won a war' against Pakistan in the Kargil area of Kashmir earlier this year. Advani and other senior NDA leaders trumpeted Vajpayee's handling of the crisis, which they believed was their trump card.

And as it fears that Gandhi, the widow of assassinated prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, is the only hurdle between itself and the Delhi throne, it was waging a campaign against her. The party questioned her foreign origin and cast doubts on her educational and administrative qualifications for the top job. Vajpayee has called her a "security threat".

Congress, in turn, concentrated on demolishing Vajpayee's image, since he was the main vote-getter. Sonia Gandhi had responded to his criticisms with allegations — denied by Vajpayee — that he helped turn in freedom fighters to British police during India's independence campaign in the 1940s.

"My origin is Italian but my heart is Hindustani," she asserted on television.

"No-one can take away my love for the family and the country," she told a public meeting.

"Those who call me a foreigner and pose themselves as saviours of the country were caught napping when the [Pakistani-backed] intruders captured the peaks in the Kargil sector," she added.

She harped on the need for a stable government, arguing that Congress alone could provide stability.

Both Congress and BJP are prepared to contemplate a coalition government, if necessary, but Congress has fewer electoral partners to help happy than its rivals. It can rely on the communist parties for support, because of their deep opposition to BJP policies they regard as ranged against Muslims and Christians and, therefore, socially divisive.

"To defeat BJP we have decided to side with Congress," said veteran communist leader Jyoti Basu, who is Chief Minister of West Bengal state.

In the welter of personal attacks an innuendoes, issues such as poverty and the provision of water, health and education were eclipsed.

Another disquieting factor, said Brinda Karat, general secretary of the All-India Democratic Women's Association, was that "various parties have given over one-third of Lok Sabha seats to people with criminal records, but not even 10 per cent to women."

With such trends, whatever the outcome of the Lok Sabha polls, political stability may still elude India.

The writer is a veteran Indian journalist. He worked for the Bombay Free Press Journal, and now freelances.

To the Editor...

The government should put its priorities right

Sir, We have learnt that the government is going to build 600 apartments to accommodate the guests attending the NAM conference to be held in Dhaka in the year 2001. Six five-star hotels will also be built for this purpose and a large number of cars will be imported for the use of the guests.

So it is quite clear that millions of taka will be spent if the government sticks to the plan for holding this conference. It is learnt that NAM has lost its previous glory and therefore, no other country showed interest to hold the conference. Then why all of a sudden, our government became so interested is not clear to us.

This reminds us the way the government evicted the poor slum-dwellers from their abode without providing them any shelter. These poor people are also the citizens of this country and, therefore, have a right to food and shelter.

What benefit our country will achieve from this conference? Moreover, after the conference, the centre, the five-star hotels and the cars will become useless and incur further expenditure for maintenance.

So, we urge the government to drop the plan and instead use the money to build houses for the evicted slum-dwellers and other projects which will be helpful for our country and the people.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Voter registration

Sir, In our country, to become a candidate in an election to the parliament, registration as a voter is not always necessary. This provides opportunity to disqualified persons to become an MP. FEMA, a citizens' coalition, recommended that a person not registered as a voter be declared disqualified to participate in such election. In our neighbouring countries, person not registered as voter is even disqualified to contest in any election.

However, many agreed that a candidate for election must be a voter but some insisted that he should be a voter of any constituency of the country while others pleaded that his or her name must appear in the voter list of the constituency where he or she is contesting in election as a candidate.

Mostafa Sohel
Dhaka

Ban *hartal*

Sir, In the past, as far as I remember, there were referendums on certain issues. The issues may have been illogical to many extents, and may have gone in favour of tyrant rulers. But in my opinion, we such referendum has become necessary in the present-day backdrop.

There should be a "yes-no" vote to ban *hartal*. No matter, which political party is in power, there must not be any more *hartals*.

We want Bangladesh to go forward, not backward.

Sadia Momtaj
Chittagong

Floor-crossing

Sir, The Election Commission has set October 11, 99 for its verdict on the controversial floor-crossing by two BNP MPs who had joined the AL as ministers. Chief Election Commissioner Mohammad Abu Hena is heading the three-member commission to settle the cases against these two MPs. The people are eagerly waiting for a neutral but pragmatic decision on this highly sensitive issue.

To restrict floor-crossing of the MPs objecting to practice a sustainable culture in the country's politics, all the political parties passed the bill (Section 70 of the Constitution) unanimously in 1991. Section 70 says: "If an MP supports a political party against the party he belongs, will lose his membership'... I believe they not only voted in favour of the bill but against in principle.

However, there might have been some shortcomings of the bill and might contradict some of the Sections of the Constitution.

Hence, I would request the CEC to give a verdict against the MPs considering the principle and suggest the political parties accordingly.

Mustafizur Rahman
Dhaka

Congrats to Bangladesh

Sir, Let me congratulate the Bangladesh football team which has just became champion in the SAF Games in Katmandu. We have been waiting for this day for a long time. Now there lays a huge responsibility on our shoulder. Those who are now playing in the national team and those who are potential players, must not think that it is the end of the journey. In fact, our journey has just begun.

Shaheen
Kalyanpur, Dhaka

Pirated CDs

Sir, This is an appeal against the pirated CDs widely available in our country. For the past few years there has been an extraordinary rise in importing pirated CDs. Pirated music and games CDs as well as software CDs and Video CDs (VCD) piracy are common in our country these days. These pirated CDs come mainly from Taiwan, Thailand and China and there is a huge demand of pirated CDs in the market, as each pirated music CDs cost only Tk 200 or even less whereas each original CD costs Tk 500 to Tk 700. Games pirated CDs cost Tk 250 whereas the original CDs cost more than Tk 500. Then who would not be tempted to buy pirated CDs?

But these CDs should not be used for a number of reasons. First of all, its quality is not up to the standard. Sometimes the sound of these CDs is not good enough.

Moreover, it's illegal to copy from a CD where it is written clearly "All Rights Reserved". But in Dhaka, behind the Baitul Mukarram Mosque pirated video CDs can be bought illegally and the authority is not doing anything about it.

But countries like Germany and Hong Kong have taken legal actions against those who are involved in piracy business. If these countries can do it, then why can't we?

Rizwan Hussain Jabbar
Dhanmondi

Mosquito menace at Uttara

Sir, In recent weeks, mosquitoes have increased to an indescribable extent at Uttara. As the evening approaches, these tiny but powerful insects begin to come out in large numbers and invade all places. As a result, students cannot concentrate on studies and people cannot spend a quiet evening. The workers of garments factories are the worst sufferers as they cannot work comfortably at all.

It is also reported that many dreadful diseases such as dengue, cerebral malaria etc., may spread by mosquitoes. But what is strange is that there is no sign to fight this menace as yet.

Will the authorities concerned do something to control this troublesome pest?

Abdul Kadir
Plot# 7, Road# 11, Sector# 3
Uttara, Dhaka-1230.