

## Is This Law Needed?

**A** GAIN the apparition of a harsh law is back. Towards the fag-end of its tenure the AL government has felt the need for a draconian law just as the predecessor BNP government had fallen for, close to the half-way point of its term in 1992. With the Cabinet deciding to place the controversial public Safety Bill (Special Provision) in the Jatiya Sangsad envisaging summary trial for certain specified criminal offences through special tribunals the spectre of a strong-arm tactic has been raised by the government, needlessly we think. Inexorably, when in the government the AL is showing that it cannot do without a 'tough' law but when in the opposition the same party had torn asunder with some incisive logic the Suppression of Terrorist Offences Act passed during the BNP rule. The AL had argued then that it was an unconstitutional measure and an onslaught on human rights which was also likely to be abused by the police, if not by the then incumbent PM or the home ministry etc. etc. The supreme irony is that the same logic can now be turned around and used against the AL government, perhaps with a greater vehemence because of the fact that the AL has refused to learn any lesson from the abandonment of the law by the BNP government earlier on. Initially enacted for two years, it was subsequently allowed to fall in disuse without any renewal, albeit as a result of public outcry. But in the present case, the AL government does not even seem keen on a time-bound duration legislate, which makes it look even worse.

When there is a long-pending clamour for the removal of the diabolic Special Powers Act itself from the statute book what is so compelling now about a special act of parliament to deal with crimes when laws do exist to tackle them anyhow? Couldn't those, with certain modifications, prove effective?

If only we had the will to enforce the existing legal provisions against crimes, if we had taken due care in preparing the prosecution and if we had landed with a rate of conviction that was next to nothing before the number of arrests made and publicised, then surely we wouldn't have any need for such a draconian law.

The timing of the bill can be suspect with the opposition agitation mounting and the elections approaching, to say nothing of its overall thrust. If the government presses on with it, then our suggestion will be that before its adoption let the draft bill be circulated to elicit public opinion on it.

## Non-starter HPSP

**T**HE ambitious five-year Health and Population Sector Programme launched in July, 1998 to provide essential healthcare services to the 'most vulnerable' women and children under the same roof is gasping for breath after a good 18 months of existence. A report in The Daily Star on Monday revealed that absence of proper planning, training and orientation at all levels along with slow decision-making in financial and administrative matters, including frequent transfer of key officials, are seriously hampering the progress of the programme.

This has amply been demonstrated by the fact that only a single clinic has been set up during the last one and a half years out of a proposed 1250 community clinics needed to deliver the services in a unified manner. Yet the annual report on HPSP (1998-99) published recently calls it 'good progress'. This is nothing but a shameless claim made to cover up for the failures of the ministry concerned. The programme aims at providing reproductive healthcare, child healthcare and controlling communicable diseases under an Essential Service Package (ESP). This is vital for maintaining and improving rural healthcare system for the millions of people living without minimum healthcare facilities in the villages of Bangladesh.

The administrative and bureaucratic tangles have to be removed and a concerted effort made to implement this 15000-crore taka project regarded as key to healthcare for the vast majority of our people. We have had enough tall talks and empty promises from the political leaders and we believe it is time to call a halt to those rhetorics and get down to some real business.

## Shibir Insobriety

**Y**ET another example of student politics gone lawry was set by the Islami Chhatra Shibir activists at Chittagong University on Monday. Novel it was indeed. Never before admission test forms have been snatched by any student organisation as part of its agitation programme. The incident speaks of a heinous intention of putting all sorts of academic activities at the university to a standstill and thereby leaving the future of several thousand students in a precarious balance. Deliberately, the Shibir activists have resorted to a means to press home their demands for trial of the killing of two fellow members which has been unsettling for the university.

Death of two Shibir cadres in a gunfight with the ruling party's student wing, Bangladesh Chhatra League, is unfortunate and the killers must be severely dealt with. But, is it not the police's duty to investigate, trace the culprits and place them before court for trial? Then why take it out on the university and, more importantly, the general students? Is their action not tantamount to taking the law in their own hands?

Shibir's destructive attitude has to stop; otherwise, the law enforcement authorities should make sure that they are forced to back out; for, any attempt to deliberately tamper with the future of so many students is a culpable offence of the highest order. However, at this point of time, we would like to see sanity restored to the Chittagong University campus so that regular academic activities can resume. Also, we would expect the forms to be recovered with or without Shibir's co-operation.

**N**ON-TARIFF issues, strongly pursued by the advanced countries led by the USA, such as trade related intellectual property rights (TRIPS), rule of origin, labour standards, and eco-standards could substantially constrain production and export from countries like Bangladesh. This is so not only because these countries may not be able to fulfil the associated conditions but also because these can be manipulated, making it very difficult for such a country to fulfil them.

Taking out patents in fact has become a frenzied activity, particularly in the USA, by transnational companies, universities and the US Government often involving products of vital interest to, or of long standing usage in, one or another of several of the developed countries. For example, some 70 patents have been taken on products from the Neem tree, which has been used in India for centuries as fungicide and medicine; and Basmati rice which is a major type of rice produced and exported by Pakistan has been patented in the USA. Many other plant species have been or are going to be patented in the USA and other developed countries. The patenting means that these products cannot be exported to the USA without paying royalties. And under WTO rules, governments of developing countries must pass laws allowing similar patents to be granted in their countries from next year. Also, when industrial designs and agricultural practices, which may be the outcome of natural evolution and may be particularly relevant for developing economies, are patented, these cannot be used by the developing countries without paying royalties. Non-compliance would make the country concerned out of step with WTO rules, and may face reprisals from the particular patent granting country, which is mainly, up to now, the USA. In Japan, two companies have applied for patent rights on 'cooking a curry', which is traditionally the cuisine of the South Asian countries. (Independent of Sunday, London, 28 November 1999).

The reduction and eventual withdrawal of the quota facilities for readymade garments (RMG) could hit Bangladesh hard because competition is going to be very stiff among many developing countries of which RMGs are a major export or the bulk of all exports. Following

the withdrawal of its quota, a country like Bangladesh will no longer have a share of the market reserved for it and may therefore see itself being out-competed by more efficient suppliers from other countries. In order to avoid that kind of a fate, Bangladeshi garment industry must raise its efficiency and international competitiveness over the next few years.

Foreign direct investment (FDI) has increased in Bangladesh over the past few years substantially from a very low base, but was still only US\$ 317 million in 1998; and it does not seem likely to increase a great deal in the coming years because of a range of reasons relating to political, infrastructural and procedural aspects, although a full open door policy concerning foreign private investment has been adopted.

Turning to the outcome of the development efforts over past decades in Bangladesh, the first point that one may note is that the poverty ratio (with access to less than 2122 kcal) has remained very high at about 48 per cent of the people over the past decade or so and that about a quarter is currently afflicted with hardcore poverty (with access to less than 1800 kcal). Given the large population of 128 million these ratios translate into over 60 million poor and over 30 million ultra poor. The large and growing population poses a major challenge before us. Economic growth has also not accelerated, and social indicators generally reflect low performances. Environmental degradation is widespread and serious, and continues unabated. Governance remains characterized by corruption, lack of transparency, inefficiency and bureaucratic hindrances. It is important that all these crucial issues are addressed seriously. A national consensus is needed for successfully addressing these fundamental problems. Given enlightened self-interest, political parties should find ways of cooperating on major

## Bangladesh in the 21st Century

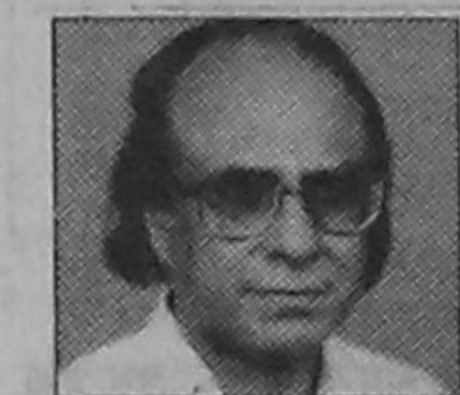
# Challenges in Shaping the Future

*In order to shape a future which will be prosperous for all, on an equitable basis, Bangladesh needs to build its internal strength in respect of economic, social and political processes.*

*Certain key requirements in this regard are: consensus among all political parties on major national issues; strong emphasis on human capability development (education, training, health), focusing on the poor and the disadvantaged; and an effective deployment of the people through a combination of private sector and state partnership efforts*

national issues. Otherwise the nation, the people, and the political parties themselves will all continue to be losers.

The present Government of Bangladesh has achieved such high profile successes as the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty and the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord. It is also keenly pursuing regional and sub-regional cooperation, so necessary for finding collective solutions to common problems in the areas of poverty alleviation, sustained economic growth, environmental protection, and enhancement and in collectively seeking benefits from the globalization process in the highly iniquitous world. However, there are crucial aspects in the development strategy now being pursued, where serious lacunae exist.



## Lest We Forget ...

by Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad

I have elsewhere argued that the ongoing development strategy in Bangladesh has two serious faults which need to be removed to make the paradigm consistent with the realities facing the country, so that the desired results can be expected from its proper implementation. One of these is poverty alleviation, which, although talked about much, has not yet been incorporated in the strategy as a direct goal. Given that the burden of the strategy is on the market mechanism that focuses on competition and efficiency, it is the rich and powerful who largely benefit from it while the poor and the disadvantaged not only remain marginal but also become relatively worse off. Poverty alleviation is to be achieved through the so-called 'trickle down' effects which are known to be inconsequential, particu-

larly where economic growth rates are low to moderate as has been the experience of Bangladesh; and, in the case of high growth rates (8 to 10 per cent), these must be sustained over a relatively long period of time before a substantial impact can occur in relation to poverty alleviation. Given the kind of poverty syndrome Bangladesh faces (indicated earlier), there is an urgency for a quick breakthrough in poverty alleviation, and that cannot be achieved unless the basic cause of poverty is directly attacked. For the most vulnerable, though, there are 'safety net' programmes; but these programmes usually provide temporary succour and do not address the underlying causes of poverty. The second faultline is that while the glar-

formation, training, technology and credit. A major focus needs to be placed on productivity improvement and expansion of the economic activity over time. Obviously, strong emphasis on education, training and health is needed, but much more in terms of creating conducive facilities for the people to launch themselves on a path that would bring forth their creative energy into full play for their own and national benefits. A major thrust is also needed toward the promotion of exports through appropriate special measures. An effective government is needed to play these roles, which involve facilitating for sure, but also direct assistance as and where necessary for enabling purposes.

The present Government of Bangladesh has been assisting the needy farmers through special agricultural credit, some subsidies, and support prices (purchasing foodgrains at the harvest time for sale at times of shortages), which are in fact the kinds of interventions that the ground realities in Bangladesh call for, but are at variance with aid conditionalities. These measures have certainly played an important role for the average annual agricultural growth rate being as high as 4.4 per cent during 1995/96-1997/98 as against about 1.0 per cent during 1991/92-1994/95. It is necessary that steps are taken to build other basic ground dynamics into the development strategy and the reform programmes being pursued. I am arguing for the sake of pragmatism. If the realities on the ground are ignored or neglected, no strategy can be successful in achieving the national goals. I am all for socio-economic reforms, but those must respond better to the needs and purposes than the existing policy regime; otherwise, one can legitimately ask why are the particular reforms being carried out?

Indeed, in order to shape a future which will be prosperous for all, on an equitable basis, Bangladesh needs to build its

internal strength in respect of economic, social and political processes. Certain key requirements in this regard are: consensus among all political parties on major national issues; strong emphasis on human capability development (education, training, health), focusing on the poor and the disadvantaged; and an effective deployment of the people through a combination of private sector and state partnership efforts promoting economic advancement, with the former producing, distributing, innovating, and seeking out and employing new and advanced ideas and technologies and the latter facilitating and ensuring that the rule of law is properly applied and that an appropriate regulatory system is in place and adequately implemented. This private-public partnership should be built having due regard to the social perspectives of people at large—such as promotion of transparency, equity and participation; poverty alleviation; corruption removal; improvement of women's status — to avoid possible social disruptions and upheavals on one hand and create conditions for an orderly, cohesive social progress on the other. Ethics and morality are obviously key attributes to be inculcated by all concerned.

For the state to be in a position to play its proper role in this process as well as in respect of its other constitutional functions, there must be a conducive political atmosphere in the country — one in which the political parties, both in government and in opposition, pursue rational interests as at people's basic goals; bring enlightened self-interest (which would imply: what is good for the nation and the people is also good for the political parties) — rather than narrow, self or group or party interest — to bear on the way they conduct their politics and political engagements with one another; and discard confrontational politics which currently holds sway. In order to shape a better future for the nation all concerned must come forward without further loss of time to set the tone for such a political process to take root as the new century unfolds. Otherwise the future may be too dark for Bangladesh amid the blaze of an approaching noon for our global co-travellers, far and near.

(This piece is in continuation of the author's last column published on December 28)

## Chechnya's Finest Hour

by Syed Zainul Akmal Al-Mahmood

*The Chechens are a pragmatic people. They don't expect any white knights to come to their rescue with blazing guns. In 1996 they trounced the Russians without outside help. They will be trying — and praying — for a repeat performance. Their aim will be to outlast the Russians in a war of attrition.*

raids on three occupied towns, Argun, Gudermes and Shali. Wrestling control, they held the positions for three days before withdrawing to their mountain bases. It was a moment of truth for Russian generals, who had promised their people an 'early victory'.

### Bombs, lies and videotape

The rhetoric so far has all been on the Russian side. This was to be the Great War that would reaffirm Russian manhood. By pummeling tiny Chechnya Russia would show the world that it was still a power to be reckoned with. Mr Putin talked about reclaiming 'lost glory'. His general boasted of the power and precision of their attacks. Government ministers bragged about the 'powerful weapons' they were unleashing, including 'vacuum bombs'. The federal army was beating the daylight out of the 'bandits' while losing very few of its own men. Grozny would fall within days; the Russian flag would fly over Chechnya within a month, and so on. Russian leaders bristled with indignation at the West's interference in Russia's internal affairs. The Americans should shut up and let them finish the job. After all, Russia was cleaning up a nest of Islamic terrorists and the West should be grateful. In fact, so preoccupied

were they in their war of words with the Americans and Europeans that they almost discounted the Chechens. They were brought down to earth the week before the last. Chechen spokesman Mohammad Saidulayev said with quiet humor, 'We planned the raids after Moscow announced that they controlled 80 per cent of Chechnya. We wanted to demonstrate how hollow their control is.'

One of the smartest moves Putin made at the beginning of the war was to get a stranglehold on the flow of information. The Russian media has toed the government line and churned out jingoistic propaganda, highlighting successes and concealing losses. This has ensured public support for Putin and his campaign. But now some of the truth may be coming out. Last week, Russians saw footage of their army exchanging bodies with Chechen guerrillas. NTV, the main commercial channel, broadcast interviews with soldiers who said many of their comrades had died in the fighting. These images have shattered the carefully fostered illusion that this has been a 'clean' campaign as far as Russian casualties are concerned.

### Brutal tactics

Clean is just what this war hasn't been. From the begin-

ning, Russia has deliberately flouted the norms of war. In 1994-96 they kept up a semibattle of attacking military targets. This time they've dropped that pretence. Unable to pin down the highly mobile Chechen units, and, indeed, wary of engaging them, the Russian army has turned its guns on the civilian population. Their strategy is simple and brutal. Towns and villages are to be bombed until they are free of rebel fighters, or completely destroyed. In most of the towns seized by Russian troops in the first three months — Urus Martan, Argun, and Bamut — the Chechen army withdrew to spare the civilian population further suffering.

The Russian leadership has been boasting about the 'powerful weapons' they are using in Chechnya. These include the 'Grad' multiple rocket launcher, notoriously inaccurate but capable of causing immense destruction, and the 'vacuum bomb'. Military analysts have called the latter the most destructive weapon short of a nuclear bomb. It creates a huge blast that incinerates buildings and at the same time sucks in air, leaving a gigantic vacuum. Living things within a wide radius suffocate to death.

Vladimir Putin has sent alarm bells ringing when he announced a relaxation of the

criteria for the use of nuclear weapons. The policy statement said that Russia would be willing to use nuclear weapons if conventional means failed to repel aggression. The world must be vigilant against the possibility that the Russians, desperate to avoid another humiliation in Chechnya, might do the unthinkable and detonate a nuclear warhead.

### Whither UN, OIC?

The international community's response to the Russian actions has been inadequate. Surprisingly, the United States has said it recognizes Russia's right to go after terrorists although it regrets the use of excessive force. This position is clearly indefensible. Even if terrorist groups are operating on Chechen territory — as Moscow claims — does this justify the army's actions in any way? Would it be all right for Britain to bomb Belfast in order to subdue the IRA? Moscow is trampling on all the principles that the West claims to stand for — freedom, human rights, and democracy. The Russian decision to consider every Chechen male between ten and sixty as a potential enemy shows the scant regard it has for basic human rights. After the rebel offensive in Shali, Russian troops burnt civilians alive in their cellars as they

hunted for rebels. Yet, in spite of all the evidence, the Western governments are having difficulty calling a spade a spade. The OIC's silence is even more shameful.

Fortunately, smaller, independent voices are making themselves heard. Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders), the humanitarian group that won the Nobel peace prize last year, has condemned Russian actions and said that they amounted to war crimes. Breaking its customary code of silence, MSF wrote an open letter to President Clinton, calling for greater pressure to be put on Moscow. It was backed up by Human Rights Watch. And last but not least, a voice from within Russia, the Human Rights Commissioner Oleg Mironov who has told PM Putin that the federal troops have failed to respect the basic rights of the Chechen population. Mironov also alleged that the government was projecting a distorted picture of the war and that the relatives of dead soldiers were not being notified fast enough.

The Chechens are a pragmatic people. They don't expect any white knights to come to their rescue with blazing guns. In 1996 they trounced the Russians without outside help. They will be trying — and praying — for a repeat performance. Their aim will be to outlast the Russians in a war of attrition. It is well known that bullies like to inflict pain, not to feel it. And the best way to deter a bully is to give him a bloody nose. If recent events are anything to go by, Russia may soon regret pecking its nose into Chechnya.

## 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.**

### The disintegration of the society

Sir, The murder of a joint secretary to the GOB on the city road (and that too in the campus area) by armed extortionists while he was returning home as a passenger from the railway station, is a dramatically spotlighting the abysmally low law and order situation in the country, for which the government can be held responsible to a large extent, as far as the ineffectiveness of the deterrent measures are concerned.

The absence of fear of punishment in the law breakers is missing in the society. The situation is getting worse day by day; and the menace to lives (most of them innocent) and properties has increased during the last few years; due to political patronisation and nepotism, because according to media reports, the cult of hidden godfathers is being encouraged, who are protecting the culprits. The politicians have lost their credibility, starting with the incompetent and compromised

ing leaders.

It is a political issue requiring the highest priority, otherwise a sudden public backlash will severely tarnish the image of the ruling regime. The political leadership has been regaling the public with a lot of political noise on not protecting the culprits associated with party activities. There is too much politics in the news, and the war between the opposition and the ruling regime has diverted the attention of the public from core issues tending to break up the norms of the society.

Perhaps political remedies are too late, and flushing will require an internal revolution. The politicians have lost their image of being able to rule the country.

A Zabr  
Dhaka

### Obsession with ideologies

Sir, Certain political parties have obsession and self-infatuation with their own brand of ideology. All the time they are

haranguing the public with fissionary dissensions, and hardly make any progress in doing something practical when they are in power. Consolidation of party position is the main aim, sucking the public dry.

What is this 'call for reinforcement of pro-liberation forces' as headlined in the DS of Jan 8 BSS, a government-controlled news agency, circulated this story for public consumption, as the considered opinion of one class of 'professionals' who are supposed to be neutral. The name of the sponsors of this discussion platform is clear enough; but where is the neutrality of these professionals? And, by the way, why the politicians are not considered as a professional group? Are they amateurs, or politics is their avocation, not vocation? Perhaps we are being ruled by amateurs who do not earn their living through politics!

For 30 years, the politicians (and the attached intellectuals) are bickering about the ideology of Bangladesh, and they are still in the bottomless basket of ideas, overlooking with the patriotic bile (note the strangeness: a bottomless basket cannot overflow). When these noble souls will get rid of their superiority complex, and come down to earth, and get down to business? We are in a vicious circle, and we are looking for saviours to get us out of this political system.

We are not only too senti-

mental, but our rich imagination is our undoing.

According to some pundits, the political opposition is always up to no good, and they are hereby branded as anti-national and anti-people. Then how are we supposed to operate politics in this country of perpetual politics? Democracy is available in several models, but not as autocratic and/or monopolistic democracy. The lust for power diminishes the healthy lust for life. Insecure politicians and parties cannot run a country, by transferring the guilt on others.

It is time the politicians got down to transparent business, cooperating with the independent intelligentsia, with no political strings attached, who have the moral guts to be independent, and different. Let loose the politicians, and the country goes to the dogs. The politicians treat freedom and power as licence, and the same licence is not allowed to others. Do the politicians secretly aspire to don the mantle of messengers and apostles? The time has come to settle once and for all the platonic differences of 30 years. The nation has lost more than 500 billion man-hours during this period in this endless debate. The national system is too high. The only way out is to goad the mighty politicians on to a broad (not narrow) and straight path. Political thinking cannot imitate

Dhaka's chaotic traffic — or is it the other way round?

Abul M Ahmad  
Dhaka

### Pain of paying bills

Sir, There was a news in the national dailies in mid last year that, PARC reformed the existing bill payment system to relieve public hassles in the payment system. As per PARC recommendation, with effect from January 2000, subscribers of public utilities would be able to pay their all types of utility bills in one and in any scheduled bank.

On the 16th January, when we asked for such bank service, Janata Bank (Uttara Branch) informed us that they got no instruction to that effect.

We hope, PARC or BB would kindly notify the public, through national dailies, about its latest status.

A R Choudhury  
Uttara, Dhaka

### Dead chicken for sale?

Sir, For a long time it has been a common practise to sell spurious and rotten meat at different market places. Some dishonest shop-keepers also cheat the customers by selling

bull's meat in the name of beef and sheep's flesh in the guise of mutton. But it appears that there is no competent authority in the administration to check this malpractices of some wicked shop-keepers and fraudulent traders.

It is now reported that some corrupt shop-keepers at Thattari/Captain Bazar Road across its big chicken market are selling diseased, half-dead and dead chickens. They are also supplying those at a cheap rate to some restaurants for consumption.

We do not know how far this is correct. We would however request the DCC health inspectors and the plain clothes to look into the matter and take necessary action.

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### Transshipment facility to India

Sir, I think Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is right. We need to co-operate with other countries, in this era of globalisation, to make our economy strong. It's not the only reason; we need to help our neighbouring country for our own national development.

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