

## Is This Law Needed?

AGAIN 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

THE 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

YET another example of student politics gone awry 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.

NON-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 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 or several of the developing 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, 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 1805 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.

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## Bangladesh in the 21st Century Challenges in Shaping the Future

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the withdrawal of its quota, a country like Bangladesh will no longer have a share of the market reserved for it and may therefore lose much, being outcompeted 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.

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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, as 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.

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