

Text Book Crisis

MORE than one month into the new academic year, the national curriculum and textbook board is yet to ensure availability of new editions of certain books for the secondary students; that, too, even after rescheduling the deadline from January 1 to 31. Naturally, the students and their parents are in a dilemma as to whether to wait for the new editions or buy the old ones. As if this was not poignant enough an indicator of its incompetence, some publishers have even brought out old editions with new covers heightening the confusion all the more. Basically, therefore, the board has failed on two counts: first, for twice turning back on its commitment to revise the selected eight textbooks in time; and second, for not being prudent enough to come up with a clarification of sorts, inclusive of a few lines on the cover-page conundrum, to dispel the widespread confusion. We wonder when it would wake up to the fact that a slippage at its end essentially means disturbance in the academic activities at different public schools and inconvenience for the teachers and the students, let alone worries for the guardians.

The prevailing situation speaks of ill planning and poor execution. There may be some systemic inadequacy in the board that forces such slip-ups. It could be that the organisation was not equipped with proper logistics and manpower to carry out the revision of text books in time for publication. Also, there appears to be a lack of control over the publishers who were given work orders to print the books. Publication of one crore and 20 lakh books is no child's play; it required a high level of co-ordination within the board and co-ordination between the board and the printing houses. Besides, the responsibility of the monitoring mechanism, if there is one, is immense as regards making sure the printers are going by the instructions set forth by the board. On the whole, the current scenario speaks of the dire need to have a re-assessment of the board's efficacy. There may be quite a few loopholes in the whole arrangement that need to be plugged.

Whatever might have been the reason for the unavailability of the textbooks in the market at this stage we would request the board to redress the situation as soon as possible, articulate and circulate a clarification on matters related to revision of the texts, new cover pages, etc. In the long term, it should diagnose the systemic failures and remedy them. Similar slip-ups should by no means recur.

Court Defiled

THE cadres of the front organisations and student wing of the ruling Awami League went berserk in the court of a magistrate and the collectorate, demanding release of their two comrades. They were arrested in connection with the abduction of a businessman named Asha at Chuadanga. The police have arrested eight of the accused named in the FIR and are looking frantically for the rest, according to reports in the *Prothom Alo* Thursday.

The disturbances by the Chhatra and Jubo League cadres took place last Monday and the activists of these organisations even brought out a 'broom procession' in the town demonstrating against the administration. They went as far as burning an effigy of the Deputy Commissioner. The cadres are alleged to have threatened even local journalists and reporters with dire consequences for publishing and reporting the news about their terrorism. In fact, we have had news items in the national press for quite some time through which the excesses committed by the cadres of the front organisations of ruling AL came to light as being symptomatic of the deteriorating law and order situation across the country. This is nothing new; for the people in power have often turned a blind eye to what their constituents did, quite unmindful of the grounds slipping under their feet in terms of governability. It had not paid in the past and cannot pay in future also:

The more the ruling party plays liberal with the indisciplined members the more they are likely to lose their credibility in the eyes of the people. Nobody can fool all the people for all time to come. The government must move quickly and deal with these hooligans as firmly as possible.

Crime Rates

THE Thursday issue of this paper gave an appalling piece of news: the crime curve has moved up. The Democratic Rights press release revealed that in January alone, 218 people were murdered, while accidents claimed another 282. Forty women were violated leaving eleven of the victims dead. Twelve housewives became victims of dowry-related assaults of which eight proved extremely tragic. Moreover, 71 persons suffered the misfortune of being abducted and ten were victims of acid attack.

These statistics are enough to raise a question mark on the country's law and order situation and for that matter, about the competence of our police personnel in containing crimes. Since the existing laws can help us overcome the situation substantially it is our enforcement mechanism which seems to be wanting. We do understand the inadequacies of our police force in terms of the number of personnel and equipment they have. In some cases law-breakers are even better equipped than the law enforcers. But the policeman's advantage ought to be the records he keeps about the criminals' particulars. The cops need to seek the help of ward commissioners to be reasonably effective.

The idea of community policing should be widely tried out with appropriate logistics placed behind it. The administration at the top has to be fully committed to upholding the rule of law. Unless we remove the hiatus between the level of arrest or accusation and that of conviction we have little chance of turning a corner here.

Incredible Passion versus Bulldozing Operation

by Anu Muhammad

It needs no more to explain that the irresponsible and compartmental operations of the government will not solve the problem of traffic jam or will not solve the citizens' other problems either. It will only add new ones. Moreover these will expose the hollowness of the administration and also its audacity against people.

THE government has been continuing its bulldozing operations with enough pride and rigour. After bulldozing hundreds of slums the police authority, with the help of other forces, has started seizing 'illegal' rickshaws and bulldozing thousands of them, finally setting the destroyed rickshaws on fire. This might seem abnormal or accidental behaviour but the authorities have proved that, this is a very much planned action since not once but several times this has been repeated.

Is it not usual to question the fact that when the government is showing its eagerness to combat transport obstruction and destruction as a serious offence and has given up everything to have a 'public (read: government) safety act' then the same government is destroying thousands of rickshaws, the major mode of transport of Dhaka city. What should be the scale of punishment of the government personnel, according to their own dearest act, for this offence? And who will take it?

It does not need more than common sense to understand that, these 'heroic' actions have been destroying not only the livelihood of thousands of families but also destroying huge value which involves capital and labour — past and present labour in a chain process. A rickshaw, as a commodity, is the cheapest mode of transport and involves different types of skill and specialised manpower. This is a transport vehicle, which largely depends on local equipment, expertise and innovative ideas. In the process, rickshaw employs the largest number of local labour as technician, hoodbody maker, artist, and finally rickshaw puller the *rickshawallah*. Usually *rickshawallahs* are very easy prey of traffic police and the *bhadrakolok*s (gentlemen), but things do not end there. Now the workers behind the scene — the hoodbody

makers, artists — all have come under attack. Police authority also started seizing rickshaw garages to destroy hoodbody, paintings etc.

Now one may ask what is the offence of *rickshawallahs*? And what rickshaws and *rickshawallahs* are doing in the *mohanganj* (metropolis)? Why they are here to become easy victim of government's and others' power exercises? The government's version is simple and well publicised: Rickshaws are creating traffic jam in the city. Rickshawallahs are creating slums, which turn into dens of criminals, so they must be treated with force.

It is true that the number of rickshaws and the *rickshawallahs* has increased to an unprecedented level in the last one-and-a-half-decade. It is also true that, the occupation is the toughest of all hard jobs. The persons who take to rickshaw, as a means of earning, usually cannot continue it for long. The inhuman labour alongwith malnutrition and unhealthy physical conditions puts the persons concerned eventually in a permanent handicapped situation. Not to mention the uncertainties regarding police operations, harial operations, *mastan* operations, passenger *bhadrakolok*'s operations etc. Why do people know all these hazards come to pull rickshaws, how can they have this incredible passion?

We must remind ourselves that the period that experienced the highest growth of rickshaws and *rickshawallahs* is the same period when poverty alleviation programme (PAP) aimed at decreasing poverty level in both rural and urban areas and

structural adjustment programme (SAP) aimed at creating new job opportunities and overall growth had been experiencing boom in terms of inflow of funds, engagements of consultants, involvement of institutions including the government etc.

The net result of the PAP & the SAP, organized by the World Bank, NGOs, government and several international organizations is relevant to explain the large-scale rural-urban migration and their destiny in Bangladesh. In the early 70's, industry was the second most important sector in GDP composition, now it has come down to the fifth position. Service sector has gone up to the top, by adding all components, it went above 52 per cent. However, no estimate could show significant rise in contribution of industry as an employment generating avenue. In fact, since independence, growth in trade and service alongwith transport and construction seems to assume the lead in the economy.

On the other hand, from time-series data of Household Expenditure Survey (HES) we see that the population living below absolute poverty line decreased (6.72/58.35)*100 in 1991-92 compared to 1983-84, yearly achievement rate came to .11.52/8 %, less than the population growth rate. In another method, urban poverty came down to 33.6% from 40.9% (40.9-33.6)/8 % per year), national poverty came down to 49.7% from 52.3% (52.3-49.7)/8 % per year) and the rural poverty came down to 52.9% from 53.8% (53.8-52.9)/8 % per year). Almost one thousand years will be needed for poverty alleviation

if this rate would continue.

But it does not stand there, it deteriorated even further. Again according to Household Expenditure Survey, during 1988-9 to 1995-6, rural absolute poverty reduced to 47.11%, from 47.77% while urban absolute poverty increased to 49.67%, from 47.63%. During the same period, national poverty reduced to 47.53% from 47.75% (47.75-47.53)/7 % per year). Out of the total number of population, population under absolute poverty level increased significantly: from 49.66 million in 1988-89 to 55.28 million in 1995-96. And after that? During the debates on GDP growth rates, the present and past finance-planning ministers revealed that, they have ensured growth rates around 4 to 5 per cent in the last decade. But according to their estimates, the period that experienced growth rate of around 35 per cent, also experienced poverty reduction of only less than 2 per cent. On another account the period ensured 600 per cent increase in poverty alleviation fund but received only less than 2 per cent decrease in head count poverty.

Here we stand: no productive and employment generating growth despite huge flow of fund and rhetoric which mostly helped providing affluence of the middle class. Here we find the explanation behind the 'annoying' flow of people from the rural areas and their quick transformation into *rickshawallahs*. Who are responsible for this flow and for this transformation? Who will pay for the miserable 'failure' or hypocrisy of the PAP and the SAP? The 'criminal' *rickshawallahs* and *bastibashis*?

The crime of these people, evicted from earlier occupation, unlike the powerful ones, is that they do not intend to live on others, do not intend to satisfy powerful people by becoming 'crime-workers', most of them try hard to earn a minimum. They have very few options before them, rickshaw is the biggest one.

Growth of unbalanced urbanization and large migration of rural poor into the urban centres have contributed to a new phenomenon that is almost common in different third world economies including Bangladesh. Low levels of industrial investment, the unbalanced growth in agriculture and employment diminishing 'reform' programmes make these economies poverty-ridden and 'overpopulated'. These 'surplus' populations move to the urban centres but could not satisfy the Lewis or Fei model because of small unwelcoming industrial sector. They go for 'other' works which often expand service sector and marketing network of cheap products made in enterprises built up by people of same categories. This large number of people create a large network of the economic activities. Most of these activities constitute a new sector usually called Informal Sector. Rickshaw is an integral part of it. Nevertheless, this sector has a multiplier effect on other areas of economic activities.

About three million people, who are potential members of the absolute poor group, are directly engaged in service and other small-scale enterprises. A significant portion of them engaged in transport and related

sectors. Rickshaw accounts for the single largest. Moreover, according to the BBS estimate, although rickshaw accounts for the least per unit value addition as a major transport mode, its contribution to the GDP is the highest in the total transport sector. Total value added of the single sector comes more than 32 per cent of the total transport sector that means, more than six thousand crore taka. About 2.5 million people are dependent on this sector in various capacities alone in the Dhaka City. On the demand side about another 2.5 million middle and lower middle class people are dependent on this service. Not only in Dhaka City, one can easily find unprecedented growth of Rickshaw and Van in urban centres all over Bangladesh. The growth of non-farm sector is largely accounted for by this mode of transport. And the demand-supply equation makes it the largest one in Dhaka City. The proponents of the market economy do not consider demand-supply flow in this case.

Keeping the whole dynamics in mind it needs no more to explain that the irresponsible and compartmental operations of the government will not solve the problem of traffic jam or will not solve the citizens' other problems either. It will only add new ones. Moreover these will expose the hollowness of the administration and also its audacity against people. The bulldozing operations of the government against slums, hawkers and rickshaws are in fact operations against majority people of the *mohanganj*. Unable to tackle, or becoming the part of the grabbers of the land, lake, river and the open space, polluters of water-air of the city, the ruling class is making the hardworking people scapegoats.

The author teaches economics at Jahangirnagar University

RUSSIAN SCENARIO

Can Putin Pursue the Path of Democracy and Accountability?

by A S M Nurunnabi

After 10 years of experimentation with political democracy and market economy, the Russian public and the Russian elite are disillusioned with both, as felt by observers. Today many Russians equate democracy with crime and disorder, and the market economy with corruption and poverty.

When Yeltsin was suffering from health problems continually, he started a 'pick and choose' process of appointing and subsequently dismissing Prime Ministers one after another — beginning with the dismissal in 1998 of the most efficient Prime Minister Chernomyrdin, who stayed with Yeltsin, perhaps for the longest period. Then came Sergei Krienski, followed by Chernomyrdin (reappointed after dismissal), Primakov, Sergei Stepanashin and lastly Vladimir Putin who proved most valuable to his boss. Thus in about two months, four or five heads rolled. As stated by an observer, in this 'national parade' of testing efficiency and merit to put on the mantle of future Kremlin leadership, Putin came out with flying colours. Putin was entrusted by Yeltsin with the toughest job of crushing the so-called 'Islamic militants' in Chechnya and thereby further consolidating his position as the most powerful candidate for the next presidential election due on 26 March next.

Putin has since proved his mettle by turning the entire Chechnya into a gigantic 'killing field', massacring thousands of innocent Chechens, uprooting millions from their homes in the name of exterminating the 'Islamic militants'.

A political analyst has observed that although there is convincing evidence that Putin will do his best to bring democracy, economic health and stability to Russia, Putin has two obstacles to overcome in his quest to make Russia a 'democratic, law-based workable federative state'. First and most daunting is the inertia of the Russian government bureaucracy. It is a bureaucracy, according to the analyst, that is not only the world's most corrupt; it is also among the most unbridgeable. The second obstacle is the war in Chechnya. Ironically, that war is very popular in Russia, which is why Putin's support for it has won him such praise and power in the country. The war is popular among the ordinary Russians because they think it has been successful. If the conflict drags on, if it starts killing large numbers of Russian soldiers and if its economic costs become intolerable, the war and Putin may become unpopular.

It is felt by international observers that if Putin can use his extraordinary political popularity to tame the Russian bureaucracy, and if he can get Russian forces out of Chechnya on honorable terms, he may be able to do what Yeltsin was unable to do: rescue Russia from its past and strike out a steady path for its advancement.

Undoubtedly, the upcoming Presidential election will witness a colourful rendezvous of contesting party candidates.

Putin, the official candidate of Yeltsin's party, with endorsement from the west, will not be there alone. There seems to be strong rivals from both the communist and nationalist blocs to face Putin, besides some ambitious army Generals, including Alexander Lebed, who came third in the 1996 election, just below the communist candidate, Gennady Zyuganov who hit the second position below Yeltsin.

Putin appears to have at present an overwhelming edge over other possible contestants in the election because of his tough role displayed towards Chechen rebels. Furthermore, he will have the full backing of the government and the state-controlled media in the campaign. The centrist coalition that eclipsed the once-dominant Communists in the Duma in the 19 December parliamentary elections could become Putin's power base.

There are some other aspects of Putin's image. They lie

in the fact that the toughness Putin likes to project has not been applied to the black spots of Russian society: Corruption, rampant tax evasion and crime. Putin's challenge is what to do after the dust settles over the Chechen war. To international observers, the failure of the reforms introduced by Yeltsin administration appeared to be a tragedy for the Russian people. Given the terrible shadow cast over the 20th century by Soviet totalitarianism, the Western world has a strong interest in seeing Russia make a successful transition to a market-oriented democracy. Observers note that the most obvious reason is that Russia still has vast stockpiles of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. Another is that the creation of a strong Russian economy will help greatly in global economic growth.

There is another aspect of the current Russian political picture. After 10 years of experimentation with political democracy and market economy, the Russian public and the Russian elite are disillusioned with both, as felt by observers. Today many Russians equate democracy with crime and disorder, and the market economy with corruption and poverty.

The question remains whether Putin will be pursuing the path of democracy and accountability in the country and will be able to restore the Russian economy, if elected president, by controlling the 'oligarchs' in Russia grown under Yeltsin's administration. No body seems to know the answer at present.

OPINION

Why Indeed, Finance Minister?

Dr. Taharat Fatima Chowdhury

Finance Minister AMS Kibria in an article entitled "This Bill is Dangerous: Another View" (DS, Jan 30) has defended the Public Safety (Special Provisions) Bill. Why, he asked rhetorically, should you not believe that the government is making a sincere and genuine effort to give the people respite from terrorists? Mr. Finance Minister, we, the citizens of Bangladesh, would like to believe that the criminals who molested a young woman in the TSC? Are these people above the law because they belong to the ruling party? All of these have been high profile crimes. Why does the Prime Minister not start off by setting his own house in order? The actions of the government belie its words!

1. All the offences described in the bill are already punishable under the existing Penal Code. So the problem is not inherent in the letter of the law. It is in the application that the problem lies. Experience shows that the laws of the land are not being applied properly. Instead of enacting harsher laws (some would say draconian laws), the logical step would be to ensure that the law enforcing agencies can function without fear or favour. It is a well-known dictum that it is not the harshness of the penalty but the inevitability of punishment that deters criminals.

2. In the bill, several offences have been made non-bailable. This runs counter to the established principles of justice. The court must be given latitude to decide who should be granted bail. It is the duty of the prosecution to present the case in such a way that there are no loopholes. To exclude the possibility of bail is to infringe on basic human rights.

3. "There can be no question," wrote Mr. Kibria, "about PM Sheikh Hasina's commitment and determination to combat this evil (terrorism)"

But there are a number of questions in the public mind. What happened, to the infamous Litton, who brandished a nine-shooter gun in broad daylight in full view of the police? What happened to the rapists of JU? What happened to the BCL

'cadres' who kidnapped schoolchildren and held them for ransom? Why did mysterious notes pressure the police to release the goons who had camped at the Nagar Bhaban? Why did the police try to shield the criminals who molested a young woman in the TSC? Are these people above the law because they belong to the ruling party? All of these have been high profile crimes. Why does the Prime Minister not start off by setting his own house in order? The actions of the government belie its words!

4. There is ample evidence to believe that the new law will be abused. The Special Powers Act is in force. Can the Finance Minister, as a conscientious man, say that it has not been used for political purposes? The government has not granted autonomy to radio and television. Can the Finance Minister honestly claim that the ruling party has not misused the state media? In fact, statistics show that it has created new record in self-advertisement!

The use of bombs and firearms during Hartal is to be condemned in the strongest terms. But these incidents increased after the government cracked down on meetings and processions. Can the honorable minister deny that the government has created a pressure cooker situation?

In the past, the government has used every trick in the proverbial book to attack the opposition. There is no reason to believe that it will not make full use of this new weapon. It will be like touching a match to an already explosive mixture of partisanship, intolerance and recklessness.

Mr. Finance Minister, the new bill seems to be the harbinger of more confrontation, more darkness. The nation is deeply disturbed. And with good reason.

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.

Achievement!

Sir, After a long time, I switched on the BTV and saw our PM speaking after the passing of the Public Safety Act. She was saying that during her party's four years rule, Bangladesh has made a lot of progress, and that even the President of the US now mentions our country in his speeches. Then the PM went on to make some points. She said we have made a lot of progress in the economic arena. Then I heard her saying not only in economy, they also have made progress in the field of sports! It seemed rather unfortunate that our PM did not have much to elaborate about the economic progress during her tenure. Instead she started to recall our taking part in the World Cup cricket and even