

## A Tribute to Farmers

IT is heartening to note that the conventional cereals-based food gap has been reduced to a zero for the first time in Bangladesh. It is nothing short of an agricultural landmark that despite having more mouths to feed, in the staple area of cereals at least we have had an output that squares up with our requirement.

Even though our luck held in terms of good weather conditions over a long stretch of time this cannot obscure the truth that the successive bumpers were made possible in no less a degree by our farmers' hard work, tenacity of purpose and unwavering commitment to their vocation. Statically unaffected by the reverberations of frequent political standstills, confrontational flare-ups and economic shutdowns, the peasantry in Bangladesh remained focused on their job, perhaps in a more intense way than before out of a sheer instinct of self-protection. This is not to gloss over the good agricultural extension work of government agencies and the technology of HYV seeds, irrigation and plant protection that has gained ground over the long haul.

If we can sustain the process there is no reason why we cannot become a rice exporting country in a few years' time.

Being relieved of recurrent annual food import bills means a huge saving of valuable foreign exchange. And it certainly would be more than icing on the cake should our country emerge as a rice exporter.

Obviously we would be fools to be resting on the oars of such a limited success. We should not labour under any false sense of achievement so long as malnutrition remains a huge problem in the country. Nearly 40 per cent of the population are said to be undernourished in one form or the other. Nutritional deficiencies are even higher among the children.

To bring about an overall improvement in our nutritional status all the sources of a good, balanced diet will have to be tapped. Of central importance here would be the enhancement of the people's purchasing power. The first step in that direction will be an assured remunerative price to the growers.

## Feud-ridden Student Politics

THE untoward incident at Dhaka University on Tuesday caused little surprise to us because we have, more or less, got accustomed to student politics-generated violence on campus. That it was sparked off by intra-party rivalry was again not surprising; for, the phenomenon has become a signature of sort for student politics these days. In recent times, on-campus violence at different universities, colleges and other seats of higher education has more often than not been triggered by tension within the front organisations of the ruling and opposition parties. The impact nonetheless has been the same: panic amongst general students, tension on the campus and apprehension in every mind over the possibility of a fiercer fight. On the whole, academic atmosphere at the university turned from bad to worse. That is the worst backlash of student politics.

Student politics of the kind that is proliferating today cannot be countenanced for too long. A lid has to be put on it. Basically, we have repeatedly requested the mainstream politicians to dissociate themselves from student politics. Almost all the leading public universities have fallen behind schedule - six months to two years - thanks to 'unscheduled' recess forced by bloody clashes on the campus. Chittagong University and Shahjalal University of Engineering and Technology have just come out of prolonged, politics-bred breaks.

Student politics, as it is practised now, has become detrimental to the interest of regular pupils and our politicians have so far been deliberately oblivious of the fact. Let us reiterate our plea to the central leadership of ruling and opposition parties, and their alliance partners: please, sever links with student organisations.

As for the university authorities, the time has come to admit that peace on their campuses is too fragile for any benefit to thousands of general students. Issuance of press release, urging co-operation from all concerned to maintain congenial atmosphere, is no less than side-stepping the real issue. Turning a blind eye to the detrimental side of student politics would not make it disappear.

## Looming HIV Threat

DISCLOSING statistics on HIV/AIDS cases in Bangladesh, the Dhaka office of World Health Organisation (WHO) stated that Bangladesh is sitting on a "time bomb". The official estimate of HIV cases is said to be around one hundred, but the actual figure, suspects the UN body, could be 20,000. The number of cases may be much less than that in some other countries, but we must not feel complacent, because geographically we are very close to a risk-prone area, Thailand, and neighbouring India. We have expatriate Bangladeshis who are at some risk. There is a tourist inflow, too.

Let's treat HIV/AIDS as a frontierless global phenomenon and prepare ourselves against it accordingly. We need to have a national strategy to fight it off. Our statistical assessment of HIV incidence does not appear to be realistic. It is high time we questioned ourselves: 'how prepared are we in preventing the spread of HIV?' In our preventive moves, we must ensure two aspects. One, we must equip our health centres with adequate screening facilities; and secondly, we must seal all routes of contamination. And putting the afflicted people on a treatment course would be equally important. Alongside, we should make the people aware of AIDS and what risks the scourge poses. We have to get out of our shell of "conservative" egotism and get equipped with strategies to keep AIDS at bay.

# A Report Card on Mr Kibria

by Hossain Zillur Rahman

**The aftermath of the flood of 1998 provides the most definitive proof that Bangladesh has come out of the shadow of famine. Mr Kibria and his government can rightly feel proud of their role in this. But the economic paradigm before the nation is now shifting to a new one, indeed has been shifting for a while. People's aspirations are now focussed on more forward-looking and robust goals of rapid growth. This paradigm of rapid poverty-reducing growth demands a different type of policy initiative, a higher level of political determination, indeed, a qualitatively new style of governance. Is Mr Kibria and his government in tune with this challenge?**

trajectory towards economic take-off. This is where Mr Kibria's complacency causes serious concern. Is he and his government reading the economic challenge rightly?

Take for example the assessment of the macro-economic environment. BIDS economists in a pre-budget seminar (State of the Economy, 2000: Selected Issues) have clearly established a growing weakness in the pattern of growth. During the first half of the 90s, GDP growth rate was 4.4 per cent per year; this has risen to 5 per cent plus during Mr Kibria's tenure. A commendable achievement no doubt and for which Mr Kibria can rightly feel proud. But there has been a clear reversal in the relative role of the agricultural and industrial sectors. In the first half of the 90s agricultural growth rate averaged to only 1.55 per cent per year (crop sector had a negative growth rate of -0.43 per cent) but during Mr Kibria's time, agricultural growth rate has boomed with the growth rate for '99-2000 expected to be over 6 per cent. In contrast, manufacturing growth rate averaged to 8.2 per cent during the first half of the '90s but has sharply decelerated to 4.25 per cent in '99-2000. As Dr Mujeri (BIDS) points out, the current pattern of agriculture-driven growth has a potential source of vulnerability due to its dependence on nature. The key concern here is the continuing failure of manufacturing sector to regain its momentum. This concern is compounded when we look at the related growth rates of investment and exports.

Mr Kibria cites World Bank Dhaka office's projection of 800 million US dollar per annum of foreign investment, primarily in the energy sector. But if we look at realized annual flows, Bangladesh Bank data shows a sharp decline over the previous year to the tune of 24 per cent last year and a further 19 per cent this year (Mujeri, BIDS paper). The same World Bank source that Mr Kibria cites also underscores the point that even

small emerging markets such as that of Cambodia not to talk of Vietnam has been outperforming Bangladesh by a wide margin in attracting FDI. The case of export trends indicates a similar gulf between Mr Kibria's reading and ground-level realities. From a consistent double-digit growth in the early 90s, the growth rates have seriously faltered in recent years. While Mr Kibria partially acknowledges that export growth rates are down, he sees this only as a temporary problem on account of the flood of 1998. The rising concern though is why even in '99-2000, export growth rates are seriously behind the trend growth path. Both Mujeri (BIDS) and Mustafizur Rahman (CPD) have highlighted emerging structural weaknesses in recent export performance. There has been a further narrowing of the export base to the RMG sector and secondly, terms of trade have moved against our exportables so that even when we export more, we are earning less.

The ground-level realities thus are quite a distant away from the glossy declarations of "highly satisfactory" which run through Mr Kibria's and his colleagues' speeches. While ever more "attractive" paper policy packages are announced for investors, they (investors both foreign and domestic) are preferring to stay away. The recent investors' conference in Tokyo in fact pinpointed this problem that the incentive attractions on paper are rendered meaningless by governance problems on the ground. A key expression of this governance problem is increasing breakdown in fiscal discipline. Dr Omar Haider (BIDS) has highlighted this by calculating the trend path on the difference between realised deficit and the anticipated deficit. In '97-'98, this was 2.6 per cent, last year it shot up to 26.3 per cent and this year it is around 30 per cent. In layman's terms, government's expenditures on itself has been overshooting the target even while it is failing in meeting its earning targets. Mr Kibria prefers to explain this all away by referring

to 1998 floods but he is convincing less and less people by this "natural" argument.

For the ordinary citizen and entrepreneur, governance problem is increasingly has a more immediate, a more urgent, a more dangerous meaning. A Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) perception survey on Dhaka citizens in October, 1999 identified insecurity as the foremost concern voiced by nearly ninety per cent of the population. Mr Kibria and his colleagues argue that such problems are not new. But what appears to be new is the widespread perception that there is a qualitative escalation in the sense and experience of insecurity compounded by a feeling that redress is not possible. These are matters beyond Mr Kibria's purview but certainly not beyond the purview of his government.

It is noteworthy that Mr Kibria's recent budget speech was rather thin on the key issue of institutional reforms. Local government, a key theme of the Awami League government, appears to have taken a backseat after that first step of reserved seats for women. There has been no reallocation of resources towards local governments worth mentioning. The report of the Finance Commission, set up as a follow-up body to the Local Government Commission, lies deep in the cold storage in the Finance Ministry. PARC (Public Administration Reforms Commission), Board of Investment, Privatisation Board all sit as toothless bodies eating up public resources while being effectively ignored by the government. Recommendations of numerous commissions are gathering dust. The only silver lining in the reforms initiated at the National Board of Revenue though the results are yet to emerge clearly. Mr Kibria has talked bravely of "indigenising" the reform process but is this more than a mere play with words? The recent forced departure of the PDB Chairman at the behest of some donor groups is a better pointer to the actual state of affairs.

To come back then to the key statistics on poverty reduction trends. Mr Kibria's tenure has seen no acceleration in the rate of poverty reduction which has been unchanged at around 0.7 per cent per annum throughout the decade of the '90s. This holds the key lesson for devising the future strategies for a more prosperous economic destiny for our country. Bangladesh's economic record is often misunderstood by observers. Since the famine of 1974, the over-riding theme around which all national efforts, conscious or otherwise, have been engaged in have been to take the country out of the shadow of famine. This is the theme which has provided the continuity among the ups and downs of regimes and the comings and goings of donors and which has galvanised the efforts of the common people in their roles as producers and economic actors. And we have been signally successful in this goal. Bangladesh today is definitively out of the shadow of famine (this is solidly documented in the recent IFPRI publication by the same name). But this has not just been today's outcome; it has been a long series of achievements. The freeing of import restrictions on irrigation equipment in late '80s giving an immediate boost to agricultural production, the impetus to rural infrastructure building by LGED from late '80s, far-reaching reforms in the food distribution system in the early '90s, the impetus to non-crop agriculture in the early '90s and the robust growth of these sub-sectors in the late '90s, the consolidation of the micro-credit network over the '90s, consolidation of safety-net initiatives in late '90s all have played a part in bringing Bangladesh out of the shadow of famine. Mr Kibria has preferred to paint a picture of agricultural devastation during early '90s. This may suit his political purpose but is certainly not an appropriate reading of the reality. The rate of poverty reduction during this period, as already mentioned, was the same as that during Mr Kibria's

tenure. It is true crop agriculture stagnated during this period and also that the then government's handling of the peasantry was highly insensitive. But food security issues were not seriously at stake. The only period of worry was the autumn of 1991 when there was an intensified seasonal deficit. Subsequently, in 1993 following a sharp drop in price of rice, there was in fact something of a "consumption holiday" for the rural poor.

The aftermath of the flood of 1998 provides the most definitive proof that Bangladesh has come out of the shadow of famine. Mr Kibria and his government can rightly feel proud of their role in this. But the economic paradigm before the nation is now shifting to a new one, indeed has been shifting for a while. People's aspirations are now focussed on more forward-looking and robust goals of rapid growth. This paradigm of rapid poverty-reducing growth demands a different type of policy initiative, a higher level of political determination, indeed, a qualitatively new style of governance. Is Mr Kibria and his government in tune with this challenge? The poverty reduction record highlights the fact that mere words will not do the job here. Take the case of education. Mr Kibria has highlighted a departmental estimate on literacy rate at 60 per cent. But what exactly is the message here when there is universal concern on the collapse of quality and ethical values in education, when nearly two-thirds of this year's SSC candidates could not pass, when "ghost" colleges and madrasahs are springing up every other day like a veritable epidemic? Such shot-circuits can hardly meet the challenges of creating the skill base for the economic challenges of a globalised world economy.

Bangladesh is slowly but surely standing up. It is the aspiration and the will of the people that this should be so. But political leaders will be a key factor to determine the pace of this change. Shall we be marking time when the economic opportunities pass us by? Mr Kibria and his government needs to be a little less "satisfied" to appreciate the depth of people's expectations. Concrete and determined actions are necessary. Not just by Mr Kibria but by all contenders for political power.

The author is a well-known economist of the country.

# Isolating Pakistan Would Further Weaken NAM

by P. R. Chari

**Isolating Pakistan would further weaken the Non-aligned Movement and other multilateral forums of the developing world; this would compound their growing irrelevance. The large dimensions of this problem should have entered the calculus of policy-makers in New Delhi. Unfortunately, they seem to be working hard to establish, as they have been doing for decades, that India is as big as Pakistan.**

strengthening the rule of law".

Laying down the democracy criterion for membership of these multilateral forums is fraught with two major pitfalls. First, true democracies in the developing world are difficult to find. Incomplete state-formation and the plenitude of ethno-political, religio-communal and socio-economic struggles in these countries forces their governments to adopt repressive steps; this erodes the democratic norm. But they have to balance the need for granting autonomy to their minorities with maintaining the integrity of this state which becomes difficult in practice.

Second, many governments in the developing world are only ensuring the trappings of democracy, not its substance. A lack of transparency, insensitivity to local demands,

widespread corruption, withering away of institutions and so on highlight the imperfections in such nominal democracies. Therefore, laying down the democracy criteria can become very contentious.

Defining Pakistan's polity in terms of military versus civil rule raises other problems. Quite recently, the majority of Pakistanis preferred military to venal civilian rule when the military coup took place. For the present the military are considered its saviours and the civilian leaders its exploiters. Who, then, should judge this issue—the people in Pakistan or the democracy zealots in the developing world?

There is another uncomfortable problem at home. Shortly, India would be recollecting the 25 anniversary of a shameful episode in its post-Independence history when

civil liberties were abrogated, the Constitution trampled with, and its citizens denied even the right to life by the courts. The Emergency was imposed for no great national purpose, but only to maintain Indira Gandhi in power. Should India have been expelled at that time from these multilateral forums?

Rhetoric apart, the original criteria for inclusion in the membership of the Non-aligned Movement, decided in a preparatory conference held in Cairo in 1961, laid down that applicants should not be members of any multilateral military alliance, or have a bilateral military agreement with a great power, or be members of a regional defence pact, or have granted military bases to a great power. Qualifying that such actions should not have been undertaken in the context of great power conflicts" wa-

tered down these prohibitions.

In practice, even these watered down criteria were generously interpreted to avoid proceeding against delinquents. Thus, Treaties of Peace, Friendship and Co-operation, despite their dormant security clauses, were not equated with "military agreements," grant of "military bases to a great power rivalry". The intention was to avoid taking precipitate action to upset the fragile unity of the Non-aligned Movement; it was and remains a disparate group of countries with little in common.

The principle unifying the Movement was its desire to steer clear of cold war rivalries between the two superpowers, acquiring some leverage thereby as a balancing force. After the cold war ended this unity and leverage has greatly eroded. Laying stress at this

stage on the democracy norm, which is irrelevant to the purposes of the Non-aligned Movement, would further weaken it, whilst interrogating its traditional catholicity and habit of tolerance towards member-states. Significantly, the very first criterion for membership of the Movement decided at Cairo was that candidate countries should have adopted an independent policy based on the co-existence of States with different political and social systems. "The eclecticism of its founding fathers is being forgotten now in the melee."

Isolating Pakistan would further weaken the Non-aligned Movement and other multilateral forums of the developing world; this would compound their growing irrelevance. The large dimensions of this problem should have entered the calculus of policy-makers in New Delhi. Unfortunately, they seem to be working hard to establish, as they have been doing for decades, that India is as big as Pakistan.

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## 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.**

### "Defence budget of Bangladesh: An analysis"

Sir, Ex-Comptroller and Auditor General M Hafizuddin Khan's letter under the above heading published in the DS on 30 May 2000 seemed to me a criticism without going into the depth of the subject matter. In the letter he has expressed concern about the Cantonment being gradually converted into a jungle of high-rise buildings instead of utilising the budget for training. But it can be mentioned here that the standard of training of the Army is self evident which is well reflected in its performance in nation and abroad. On the other hand there are genuine reasons for the construction of high-rise buildings which may be summarised as follows: (1) Our country is one of the most thickly populated countries, particularly the Dhaka city. Our population is increasing in a rapid pace contrary to the scarcity of land. So naturally building high-rise apartments turns out to be the need of the time. (2) A trend of multi-storied building by civil develop-

ers, started much before the defence forces. (3) Old type barrack accommodations are low cost tin shed which are weak and less durable and needs major maintenance every year due to damage caused by northwester and rain. (4) It is contributing to overall city plan and infrastructure. (5) Multi-storied buildings are more strong and durable.

In this regard I would also like to mention certain facts. Whenever the subject of troops accommodation arises a picture of gloomy dilapidated barrack houses comes to the fore. This is how a mindset works. Probably it is the outcome of the colonial legacy where the colonial British Indian native troops used to stay in such accommodations. The white troops belonging to the regular British Regiments used to live in such accommodation also. It is to be remembered here that those troops stayed in India for a very short time and were rotated very frequently, going back in the comfort of concrete houses in England at regular intervals. But in Bangladesh only fourteen per cent of the married troops are authorised family accommodation. A

married soldier of any rank probably stays once or twice with family in his entire career, owing to the long waiting list. Isn't it a very uncompassionate way of thinking that the poor soul here should live in a semi-pucca accommodation with his family after such a long waiting? This is entirely a case of morale and I do think that it is about time our mind set should change.

Dr M A Bari  
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### 'Kamal Majumdar not cooperating...'

Sir, A news item captioned as above appeared in your esteemed daily dated 14 June 2000.

The news reported that the Detective Branch of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police sought co-operation of the father of an accused of a murder case in apprehending and/or preventing escape of the said accused who stands named in the FIR. It also becomes evident from the report that the police failed to secure cooperation of the accused's father who is an MP. Such failure of the police is not warrantable either in the code of criminal procedure, 1989 or in the DMP Act/1976 in which the powers, functions, duties etc of the police are prescribed. In matters relating to the maintenance of the law and order the police wield very wide powers and having such powers in hand when they fail to secure

cooperation of the father of an accused the matter is to be treated as a miserable failure. Law does not give any special treatment to a member of Parliament or his son. He stands on the same footing with an ordinary person when a crime is allegedly committed.

Section 42 of the Code of criminal procedure has clearly imposed a duty on members of the public to assist a Magistrate or a Police Officer in the taking or preventing the escape of an offender. In the event of disobedience to or non-cooperation with the police or Magistrate in such a case the person or persons shall be liable to prosecution u/s 187 of the Penal Code 1860.

Despite the face of such clear provisions of law, Kamal Majumdar and many other influential persons are often being spared by the police. In this circumstances the members of public may be forced to believe either that the politicians are twisting the law to facilitate their own escape or escape of their near and dear ones or there is definitely something wrong somewhere.

A worried Citizen  
Dhaka

### Linking roads

Sir, Recently, the City Corporation has taken several initiatives to ease the ever increasing traffic congestion. The initiative includes among others the improvement of road inter-

sections, widening of roads and introducing one-way traffic in a number of important roads. The City Corporation deserves appreciation for their laudable efforts. However, there is a great need for link roads which, if constructed, would definitely contribute to further improvement of traffic congestion. Through this letter, I would like to draw the attention of the city fathers towards construction and improvement of some link roads. These are:

1. Linking Bangla Motor through Paribag to Elephant Road.
2. Saat Raastar Moar to Karwan Bazaar and possibly to Kazi Nazrul Islam Road (Airport Road). The Tejaon truck stand will require dislocation and shifting the truck stand outside the main metropolis will clear the area of anti-social activities.
3. Allowing vehicles to move through Peelkhana BDR Gate from Jhikatola to Nawabganj. If vehicles can ply through Cantonment area, it is desirable vehicles be allowed through BDR area as well. This will save a lot of time and will greatly benefit the people of the Old Dhaka.
4. Traffic be diverted from Mohakhali crossing to Banani Road Crossing (one-way traffic) along the road adjacent to Phillips Headquarter.
5. Construction of new link roads from Bangla Motor to Green Road through Kathal Bagan area.
6. Widening and improvements of Link Roads through

Karwan Bazar. These include Janata Tower to Hotel Shonar-goon and another road from Tejaon Railcrossing to Hotel Sonargoon through Karwan Bazar.

The above decision if implemented will go a long way to redress the traffic problem in the city.

Noman Ali  
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Dhaka

### Cricket vs politics

Sir, I was really very impressed with the performance of Bangladesh cricket team in the last World Cup especially when they beat the mighty Pakistan. This victory not only overcame them but the entire nation as well. However, it was really very annoying to hear certain remarks like "This victory is like winning a war against Pakistan" or "We didn't beat Pakistan in cricket but in the independence war". Isn't these remarks very irrational? It seems that those who made such remarks have no idea what independence truly means.

And by the way, in the recent Asia Cup Tournament Bangladesh did lost to Pakistan by 233 runs. Does that means our country has lost its independence to Pakistan? To many petty persons, it might seem so but to me independence is much more precious than winning a match.

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