

Voting right for overseas Bangladeshis

M SHAFIULLAH

HOW many people you have in Kuwait and what is the number in Iraq? I was asked in the meeting of the Higher Committee on Repatriation in Amman during the Gulf War. I gave an approximate number. The committee members gave a second look at me. The international and other organisations were finding it difficult to arrange chartered flights and logistics in the absence of reliable figure for Bangladeshis.

I was sent to Amman from Abu Dhabi in a few hours' notice to arrange repatriation of displaced Bangladeshis after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. Foreign office vaguely said thousands stranded in Jordan. Embassies in Kuwait and Iraq had no precise figure. It was expected. In fact, none of our embassies has exact number of our nationals in a foreign country. We have no mechanism to find out the precise figure. Bangladeshis are simply averse to register themselves as per requirement of the passport and consular regulation. Some have genuine constraints as they are taken to workplaces from the airports and others have no motivation but all have common desire to become voter for general elections at home.

"When we were even unemployed at home we cast votes. Now we are on employment abroad. If it is correct that our number is about three million and our remittance is over two billion American dollar per year, why we should be de-franchised for default of being out of 'homeland'?" asked a group of wage earners.

To take off the heat out of discussion the ambassador invited them to finish the cup of tea before it got cold. After resumption they wanted to know about bank defaulters. "We hear that they default some thousand crore taka but are not debarred from voting or to become candidate for membership of Jatiya Sangsad. We default from home on employment abroad and lose voting right. But they default public money and

retain the right to vote and membership. Some wrongs seem to be right." The ambassador was assailed.

In a desert location under rigour of blazing sun a group pointed out, "We are lessening the burden of unemployment and of the social unrest. Will we be counted in the country?" A group leader even went to the extent of saying that our people left their families behind for years and prolong their stay abroad as long as possible to earn an extra

set to avoid possible entrenched interest. [C] A number of local staff were employed to assist the volunteers in camps/centres where the number of refugees were more as well as to keep an eye if any irregularities committed by the volunteers. Being foreigners they had no interest in our enrolment and were found to be objective and fair. [D] We the incharge of the repatriation group, kept constant vigilance on the volunteers and the local staff. In record time we finished enrolment

bag have to be sent well in advance to the ambassadors so that polling may take place few weeks before that in Dhaka in the embassies and in other centres as the case may be with the assistance of local governments. I witnessed Tunisian Election in Libya. Law enforcement in countries where Bangladeshis are concentrated are so strict that any delinquent expatriate will find himself deported within hours if not other harsh punishment is meted out. It is not like conducting SSC and HSC examinations in Bangladesh. Ambassadors in presence of party representatives and local authority would arrange sealing of the ballot bags and transport by air to Election Commission to reach well before the election day in the country. It is obvious that expatriates cannot vote but for chosen political parties. It would necessitate separate set of ballot papers for the expatriates. The party which polled the highest number of vote will receive 2/3 seats weightage in the Parliament as agreed beforehand by the political parties. This system has been working well in the Republic of Malta.

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Bangladesh now has embassies in countries where sizeable number are employed. The heads of mission can organize the enrolment of voters if they are given full authority, a set of precise and unambiguous decisions as well as a small amount of fund accountable to the Election Commission. The community is self-motivated for enrolment for general elections at home... Politicians from all sides of the spectrum during the last decade courted the expatriates like suitors for their favour. Now they have a "promise to keep".

amount of money. They have been implementing family planning programme of the government beyond their knowledge. In his opinion the right to vote will give them a sense of belonging to the country.

A democratic polity can ignore these realities at its own peril. However, even if all agreed but how to approach the Herculean task with no past experience and obvious resource constraint? But beginning has to be made at some point of time even out of scratch. If it does not sound overbearing our experience of Gulf War repatriation could be a little guide. Bangladesh had no Mission in Amman. [A] We raised a group of volunteers from among the expatriates to enlist the refugees at different centres/camps on the basis of passport and travel documents. [B] Each group of volunteers was replaced after five days by a new

of some 65,000 expatriates in the desert camps and put them on the chartered flights to Dhaka in an orderly manner.

This is the age of information technology. Genie is under finger tip waiting for command. Bangladesh now has embassies in countries where sizeable number are employed. The heads of mission can organize the enrolment of voters if they are given full authority, a set of precise and unambiguous decisions as well as a small amount of fund accountable to the Election Commission. The community is self-motivated for enrolment for general elections at home. Only imaginative leadership is needed at field level. Once enrolled it would serve the twin purpose of voter list as well as the number of our expatriates abroad in total and in each country.

The ballot papers in diplomatic

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Expulsion of Russian diplomats

Cold war in the horizon?

HARUN UR RASHID

THE recent expulsion of Russian diplomats by Washington and a tit-for-tat response from Russia has raised serious questions whether the direction of foreign policy under Bush administration is bringing back Cold War. Some argue that a breeze of cold war is wafting throughout the entire globe.

The relations with Russia are bound to deteriorate after Washington initiated the expulsion of four diplomats and marching order of another 46 embassy officials from the US by July. The Russian Foreign Ministry indicated that American diplomats would be expelled for "conducting work incompatible with their status" a diplomatic code language for spy activities. It appears that about 100 embassy officials from both countries could be victims of what Russia calls "spymania".

Spy activities are nothing new in the diplomatic arena. All nations do this in some form or other. This had existed in the past, is alive at present and will continue in the future. In fact the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations of 1961 states that one of the functions of a diplomatic mission is to ascertain "by lawful means conditions and developments in the receiving state and reporting thereon to the government of the sending state" (Article 3). The question is what kind of activities are considered as "lawful means"?

Some argue that spy activities on major powers are crucial to the maintenance of peace and security. No major power will be surprised by the development of a new weapon that reduces balance of power globally. Each power keeps a tap on the other and balances its strategic power to counter its perceived threat. It is maintained that such expulsions of diplomats are counter-productive in the long run.

Although President Bush has claimed that his decision to expel

Russian diplomats was right and a realistic approach to foreign policy, Russian Foreign Policy Adviser Sergei Prikhodko called the move a "campaign of spy mania" and a "fall back to the Cold War epoch". Foreign policy analysts say that he could be right.

Bush administration has given signals of combative foreign policy towards North Korea and China in recent months.

line policy on North Korea. The days of engagement under Clinton era has been replaced by tough stance under Bush administration. China is no longer a "partner" but a "competitor". US concerns on China involve its human rights record, arms sales, policy on Taiwan and acquisition of wide-ranging sophisticated military arsenal. China on the other hand views the development of missile

At the end of the Cold War, it was hoped that a "new world order" would begin. It seems now, that expectation turns out to be a mere fantasy. Some say that Reagan era is bouncing back in the US under the Bush administration. Given the foreign policy designs of the Bush administration, it seems that they could be right.

US's refusal to talk to North Korea on the development of missile has introduced a new element in the volatile Korean peninsula. North Korea's state newspaper recently blasted the US for threatening the inter-Korean thaw with a Missile Defence system, a version of "Star War II". The development of missile system, the paper argued, was pushing North Korea to the phase of new confrontation and seriously threatening the peace and security in the Korean peninsula.

The North's hardline stance has set alarm bells ringing in South Korea which is keen to set a date for the promised visit to South Korea by North Korea's leader Kim Jong-il. South Korea appears to be anxious to see that the US softens its hard

defence system alarming and as a threat to peace and security in Asia Pacific region.

The recent visit of Vice Premier Qian Qichen to Washington did not appear to ease their bilateral relations. Although President Bush assured the Chinese Vice-Premier that the US posed no threat to China, he made it clear that the US would honour its obligations under Taiwan Relations Act. This means that the US will get involved to defend Taiwan if China wishes to retake Taiwan which it regards as an integral part of China.

It is significant to note that the US and Singapore have signed a strategically important naval partnership agreement. This has provided the US navy a carrier-berthing facility

for the first time in South East Asia in almost a decade. The super carrier USS Kitty Hawk has docked at Chang's deep draft pier in recent days. This naval facility in Singapore improves the capability and flexibility of the US Seventh and Third Fleets battle groups operating in the Pacific, Indian Ocean and the Gulf. It also gives the US a base capacity although both the US and Singapore are hesitant to describe it that way.

Added to this, the Middle East peace is in a limbo. It seems that the Bush administration has left to the parties to settle the sticky issues, an unachievable feat. Washington's involvement to promote a dialogue between Israel and the Palestinians takes a back seat. This will imply that Palestinians will attempt to get Europe and Russia more involved in peace-making process. As a result a chasm may appear between major powers on the issue. The fence-mending activities with Arab world during the Clinton administration seem to be at risk and as a result Iraq's defiance to US is likely to be supported by the Arab world.

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Needed a people-centred land and agrarian reform policy for poverty reduction

MD. ABDUL KADER AND SOHEL IBN ALI

IN Bangladesh, land still is an essential productive asset and a means to sustain livelihood. Access to land is important for household welfare, and sustainable reduction of poverty, because in most developing economies it allows the poor to make productive use of family labour and improve their income and well being. The contribution of land to economic growth depends on the security, duration and enforceability of property rights.

In our context, the rural economy is still land centred; only a piece of land can ensure social, economic, political and psychological security for the landless poor. It can empower the landless people to survive with due respect and honour for land alone secures their supply of food, creates opportunity for employment, increases family income and upgrades their living standard.

The combination of high level of poverty and high population density makes land issues most significant for reducing poverty and economic growth in Bangladesh. Up to 50 per cent of rural households own not more than half an acre each on average and 70 per cent of farms in the country are under 2.5 acres in size. A recent study on determinants of poverty using household data from various years and up to the mid 1990s found that in rural areas, households with more than 2.5 acres of land had per capita consumption 40 per cent higher than a landless household, controlling for other determinants of consumption (Wodon, 1999). Therefore, for poverty reduction, it is necessary to establish the rights of the landless

farmers and fishermen over government owned land and waterbodies, respectively.

However, because of the limitations in the existing land laws and lack of proper implementation, not only the landless are being deprived of their rights but also the small and marginalised farmers are losing their possessions. Earlier also due to the weak land laws and corruption in the land administration, some land grabbers usurped lands of the poor and marginalised farmers. They also grabbed government owned khas land, abandoned land, khas waterbodies etc. allegedly by bribing the land administration.

Our National Parliament election is just approaching. If the government and opposition parties are able to reach a consensus, it may be held by June. By this time, some political parties might have started to formulate their election manifestos. One objective of writing this article is to draw attention of the political parties to include some issues relating to land in their election manifestos. Because, if we consider the experience of successful "Operation Barga" and "Land Distribution Programme" in West Bengal in India, we will find that the main reason behind this achievement was political will and pledge.

Land Policies Need to be Amended

Some existing government policies on land and related problems are discussed below, which by timely and necessary modification/amendment can be made effective for poverty alleviation i.e. by establishing rights of the deprived and landless poor, total development process of the country can be accelerated.

Re-fixing the ceiling of agricultural land: Following the land

reform ordinance, 1972 by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the ceiling limit of the agricultural land was 100 bigha/ 33.3 acres. In 1984, President H. M Ershad reduced the ceiling limit to 60 bigha / 20 acres. But the ordinance became very complicated as new term was added to it. It stated that those who have 100 bigha of agricultural land can keep the land but the new buyers cannot exceed the 60 bigha limit. Due to this, the ceiling surplus agricultural land could not be recovered. After promulgation of this policy already around one and half decades have passed. In the meantime, by dint of modern and developed cultivation technology and process and agricultural inputs like fertilisers, seeds etc. the crop production per acre has increased a lot. On the other hand, day by day the number of landless families is also increasing. This has led to their migration to nearer cities and towns creating slum problems there.

The rate of landlessness in 1983-84 was estimated to be 46 percent of rural households. This consisted households that did not own any land (8.6 per cent), that owned up to 0.05 acre of land (9.5 per cent), and that owned up to 0.49 acre of land (28.2 per cent). The rate of landlessness in 1996-97 increased to 56 percent which comprised of households owning no land (10.2 per cent), households owning up to 0.05 acre of land (11.4 per cent), households owning up to 0.49 acre of land (34.4 per cent) (source: National Agriculture Census-1984 & 1997). Clearly, landlessness has significantly increased. In fact, the increase in the pure landless (no land) category would have been much higher had it not been for the large rural to urban migration during this period which provided (and still provides) a window for exit of the pure landless from the rural accounting.

Again, 83.1 percent households own a small agriculture farm of less than 2.5 acres, 14.3 percent households own a medium agriculture farm of less than 7.5 acres, and only 2.6 percent households own a big agriculture farm above 7.5 acres. In this context, it is necessary to re-fix the ceiling limit of agricultural land in order to reduce the number of the landless as well as the level of poverty (source: World Bank Land Study in Bangladesh).

The production of crops is often dependent upon the nature and fertility of the soil. Therefore, it is necessary to re-fix the ceiling limit of agricultural land based on the fertility and nature of soil of a particular area. The ceiling limit for the first class land could be 30 bigha / 10 acres and for the second class land it may be 45 bigha / 15 acres.

Again, in the meantime, the family definition has changed. At present, in the rural areas it is rare to find a joint family. Therefore, compared to the family consumption, the present ceiling limit of agricultural land is much higher than actually needed.

So it is presumed that, if the ceiling limit is changed in the above way and the new one implemented, about 8-10 lakh acres of ceiling surplus agricultural land can be

recovered and redistributed, which will play a significant and important role in poverty reduction.

Fixing ceiling on holdings for non-agricultural land: Now, there is no ceiling limit on land holdings for the non-agricultural land. Therefore, the agricultural land is transformed for different non-agricultural activities. Consequently, the agriculture production hampers. Therefore, it is necessary to fix a ceiling on non-agricultural land to prevent excessive concentration of land.

Amending the laws relating to charland: One of the main objectives of Land Reform Ordinance 1972 was poverty reduction and empowerment of the landless poor. An important provision of this ordinance was to classify as khas land all lands emerging as a result of accretion. Those who had lost their land due to erosion were given priority on condition that the lands to be settled upon should not exceed the ceiling.

Again, one of the main objectives was to stop the violent conflicts, which always occurred in the charland areas. Before 1972, the powerful influentials in the southern districts used to grab charlands by employing mastans and lathials. Most of the real owners of the lands died or were injured and ultimately became pauper facing prolonged litigation. Ninety percent of the people who had a small piece of land simply failed to face continuous hearing or non-hearing of cases. As a result, the number of landless people increased, government lost substantial amount of land revenue and corruption bred as many dishonest government officials allegedly made much money through underhand deals. Although this law was in existence until June 1994 and was repealed by the government restoring the right and title of the original owner if such lands reappeared in the same place within 30 years of erosion, it brought little benefit to the landless or the original landowners. Rather the prolonged period (30 years) led to further conflicts and violence. Therefore it is better we revert to the law of 1972.

Abolishing absentee ownership of agricultural land: The ownership of agricultural land should be in the hands of farmers in order to increase the agricultural production. In our country, there are landowners who reside in the city and are by no means connected with the cultivation process. Their land is cultivated and consequently the crop production is not satisfactory. Therefore, to ensure total development and consequent poverty reduction, the ownership of lands should be gradually handed over to the real farmers. In our context, no development can occur or be sustained without developing agriculture sectors as well as the farmers.

Forming separate land commission for indigenous people: The main problems of the indigenous people is to sustain their ownership over their land. In most of the cases,

these tribal people do not have legal documents for the lands they are living on and cultivating for centuries. The reason behind this is that they consider land as collective / societal property not private / individual one.

This is continuing for centuries and they are totally unaware about the exchange, distribution or tax of the land. The Bengalee land grabbers are taking improper advantage of their ignorance. They are devouring the tribal property and the actual possessors are facing banishment in their ownland.

The indigenous people are totally unaware of the land revenue and tax, the land grabbers 'persuade' the land administrators and buy these lands through illegal auction. Apart from this, sometimes the lands of the indigenous people are included in Khas Khatrian during land survey and distributed among the Bengalees. The indigenous people usually remain deprived even after applying for lease of the khasland.

It is necessary to find a quick and proper solution to the problems regarding land issues of the indigenous people who are living in the plain land. In order to implement this task it is necessary to form a separate 'Land Commission' like 'Chittagong Hill Tracts' Land Commission for the indigenous people of the plain land. Land rights of the indigenous people should be established and secured so that this useful section of the population can be brought into the mainstream of development process.

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Excerpts from the 'declassified' main report of Hamoodur Rahman Commission

POLITICAL BACKGROUND-XVI

IN the meantime on the 23rd of March, a day dear to the heart of Pakistanis as being an anniversary of the Lahore Resolution, which called for the creation of Pakistan in 1940, instead of the joyous flying of the Pakistan flag the new flag of Bangladesh appeared on government buildings and private houses and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman himself hoisted the Bangladesh flag on his residence. On 24th and 25th, Mr Bhutto met the President to discuss the proposals of the Awami League as they were developing. On the evening of the 25th the Pakistan People's Party advisers were informed by the President's team of the final proposals made by the Awami League. At about mid-night between the 25th and 26th Dacca was awakened to the noise of thunderous gunfire; the military action which has since become so well-known had started. Curiously enough, as is now known to be undoubtedly true, General Yahya Khan had already left Dacca. In the evening it had been given out that the President could not be contacted because he had gone to dine at the Eastern Command. In fact he had left for Karachi.

Quite obviously such an action could not have been taken without some previous preparation. Indeed no secret has been made of the fact before us that a contingency plan, known as Operation Blitz, had been in readiness for a long time and it has been, on that account suggested that the negotiations which were carried on from about the middle of March up to this date were no more than a camouflage, it being all along the intention of General Yahya Khan and his military advisers to cow down the Awami League with a heavy hand. It is said that at no time was General Yahya sincere in his expressed desire to transfer power to the elected representatives of the people more specially in East Pakistan. There are indeed circumstances which support this point of view and this is a matter upon which we will dilate with care later in this report. But from the single circumstance that a plan was in readiness to meet the contingency of the talks resulting in failure,

we are unable to take the extreme view that all that happened during this period of two weeks was a mere pretence. The situation in East Pakistan was such that, on the assumption that the General was sincerely motivated, it would have been foolish, at least, to have nothing ready to meet the situation if talks still finally broke down. Dacca was by now a city in which it was impossible for anybody or at least for any West Pakistani of consequence and more specially those associated with the government of Pakistan to move without armed escort. The province generally obeyed the will of Sk Mujib.

On the other hand, we have reason to believe that the Awami League itself intended to take action at 3am on the morning of the 26th March, 1971. It is natural, therefore, that General Yahya might have regarded the evening of the 25th as the last point of time at which a solution must be achieved if it was to have any meaning. It is true also that the government at that time was handicapped by a singular inability to rely upon the normal sources of intelligence. However trained such agencies ordinarily are, in a province which was seething with revolution it was difficult to have a sufficient number of local agents from whom information could be gathered. In addition to this was the language problem. It is said to reflect that nearly 25 years after the achievement of Pakistan it should be still possible to have this problem of communication.


One should have thought that the very first step taken in an action of this kind would have been the arrest of the ring leaders but although the attempt was made that night, it is an astonishing fact that only one albeit the most important one, of the leaders, that is to say, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman himself, was arrested and in regard to him, too the position voluntarily submitted to arrest rather than that the Pakistan Army was able to seek him out. It is true of course that Dr Kamal was also arrested later but on that night at least he had gone underground and was untraceable. It has been suggested that the main reason of this

was that the persons employed to arrest the leaders were not familiar with their faces; we think this is too weak an explanation. A contingency plan, as we know, had already been prepared and it surely must have been a part of that plan to arrest these people. It could not, therefore, in the circumstances, have been difficult to assign particular persons for the task of arresting each of them and these persons could easily have been made familiar with the faces of the leaders who during the preceding 10 years at least had been constantly coming to the President's House. Of greater force is the explanation that during this period the Awami Leaguers had been shifting their place of residence from night to night and it was not, therefore, easy to trace where they were on that night. Be that as it may, the fact remains that only Mujibur Rahman, a little later, Dr Kamal Husain were in fact arrested.

As against the poor intelligence which the Pakistan Army had, we are willing to believe, as has been suggested, that the sources of intelligence which the Awami League had, were superior, and that they too had reason to believe that action would be taken on that night. But really in the ultimate analysis these issues matter very little. The fact remains that negotiations finally broke down on the 25th, whether designedly or not, we are not at present judging, and the fact remains that military action, which we are compelled to say, was not merely preventive but punitive in nature, was taken. That in an action of this kind there would be a substantial degree of violence entailing the loss of human life and destruction of property was inevitable. But which on the one hand it is stated that no more action was taken than was strictly necessary and that the number of cases of loot, pillage, rape and similar offences that took place was minimal and of the order that might be expected in any action of this kind, on the other, it is alleged that the action was ferocious and vindictive. Suddenly, not merely allowed but ordered to take action for bringing the situation in hand, the army might naturally be expected to take action that would be in some measure at least, revengeful. It was as if a ferocious animal having been kept chained and starved was suddenly let loose.

Tomorrow: POLITICAL BACKGROUND-XVII

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Dr. Rubaiul Murshed

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- has stopped breathing;
- is breathing with difficulty and his lips are going blue;
- is unconscious;
- has a deep wound;
- has a deep wound that is bleeding badly;
- has a serious burn;
- has a suspected broken bone;
- has a chemical in his eyes;
- has been pierced in the ear or eye;
- has been bitten by an animal or snake;
- has drunk or eaten anything which you suspect may be poisonous.

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