

# Government accepts donors' demand for poverty reduction programme

*Is it to facilitate concessionary loans or commitment to reduce poverty?*

CONCESSIONARY loans from IMF and World Bank is now linked to implementation of the poverty reduction programmes by the government. The government and the private sector will jointly manage the Poverty Reduction Strategy Programme (PRSP) conceived by the donors. It will be "country owned rather than government owned" as disclosed by the government. These facts were made public at a recent city seminar jointly organized by the IMF and the Government of Bangladesh.

All of the above is welcomed as is the statement made by the IMF member that it expects Bangladesh to dramatically reduce poverty by 2015 and almost eliminate by 2027. The fact that IMF sees the need to at least publicly push a poverty reduction programme means it too recognizes the need for eradicating poverty as a platform for generating wealth. Both IMF and the World Bank have rethought much of their positions and thrust on poverty reduction is an attempt to remain relevant as WTO threatens to overwhelm all other outfits.

The government has also agreed to waive the Official Secrecy Act in this case and greater accountability has been written into the programme. It appears that public demands are effective only when they are articulated by major donor agencies. It has taken the IMF and the WB to make the government take poverty reduction, transparency, accountability and participation based development seriously. One was also under the impression that all development plans were always country and not government owned. Obviously, the official quarters thought otherwise.

One also observes that the very donors who demand transparency are hardly that in their functioning and this is essential if the issue is to be taken seriously. Appearing what is clearly a donor driven programme, one wishes the government had some means of translating public demands into political-economic realities instead of waiting for donors to push them.

The more one listens to the people, the less will governments have to function according to dictates. It depends on what is perceived as more important in policy shaping. Whether it's public opinion or donor opinion that matters even when they speak of the same. At this point it's both the donors and the people who seem to be asking for the same from a government that has the electoral mandate to deliver, if it does not waste the opportunity on opposition bashing, as the previous government did.

## Visa for AL-backed convention

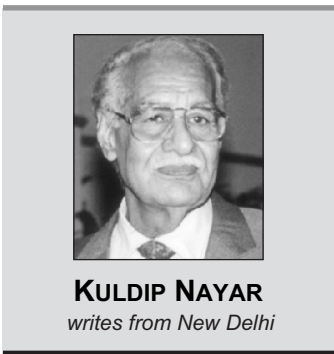
*International participants should have been allowed to participate*

ACCORDING to the organisers of the two-day convention on "Crimes Against Humanity", eight of their invitees, three from Pakistan, four from India, and one from Maldives were not allowed to participate due to visa related problems. Among the most prominent of those prevented from coming was the well-known human rights activist Asma Jahangir from Pakistan. In comments to the BBC she said she was originally granted visa but told at the last moment that it was valid only from the 20<sup>th</sup> and not before. When she pointed out that the visa did not mention any date, our embassy in Islamabad cautioned her about inconvenience on arrival.

This one story tells it all. Obviously the government had a change of heart about international participants and decided to prevent them from attending the AL-backed convention. In our view this move has significantly damaged our government's democratic credentials and gave more credence to the AL convention than perhaps it would have otherwise got. In the age of the Internet and instant communication nothing can be hidden or prevented from becoming known to the world by preventing participants from attending conferences. In fact more attention is attracted to an event when the government tries to prevent it from taking place properly. If the government felt that these foreign guests would be given wrong information by the opposition then it could easily have given its own versions of things to the same guests through personal or group interaction while they were here. By preventing them from coming the government has only proven to the outside world that it had something to hide and also that it did not allow the opposition to function freely.

These actions are products of autocratic mindset completely out of tune with the 21<sup>st</sup> Century world. On the one hand we claim to be a democracy and on the other we prevent those who are opposed to the government from holding a peaceful convention with international participants. A democratically elected government, adhering to the rule of law, should never have anything to hide from its people or from the people of the world. We strongly protest the government's action and insist that it should never happen again.

# Three years of nothing



**KULDEEP NAYAR**  
*writes from New Delhi*

WITH this budget session of parliament beginning February 28, the National Democratic Alliance government (NDA) will complete three of its five-year term. The President will outline the future programme at the joint session. But the speech will have the cabinet's approval. Perforce, it has to be laudatory. Yet this is the time to discern national trends.

India is not a failed state. But it is a failing state, with pervasive poverty, inequitable distribution of income and assets, stunted growth rate and numerous scams at the government level. There is no meaningful difference in the lives of the majority of the people. But there are great disparities among the states. Also, some people are growing so rich and insecure that they do not want to accept even awards for high tax return. Four states are doing well: Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka and Maharashtra. They have attracted 75 per cent of foreign investment. Bihar and UP, with one fourth of India's one billion population, have hardly any outside investment. They have had a zero growth in the last two decades.

Punjab may become another Bihar if nothing is done to extract it from the present crop pattern of wheat and rice in which it is stuck with Rs. 54,000 crore of rural indebtedness. The northeast cannot claim to have had even a single private project of five crore rupees in the last many years.

Villages, where 70 per cent of the population lives, have a slice of only 24 per cent of the country's growth. Urban poverty is becoming more glaring. And only 10 per cent of our students go beyond the sixth class, although the country's literacy rate is 62 per cent.

The unemployment problem is more sophisticated machines and less of hands. He expected other opportunities to come up. True, the service sector is expanding but industrial growth is falling. It has come down to 2.3 per cent from 9 per cent in the last few years. But without the solid ground of industry, the service sector will be hanging in the air. Those who are beating the drum of globalisation should realise that the growth rate in the last decade, after the introduction of

others but essentially trying to strike a path for ourselves suited to our own conditions. Fiats by Washington, which still wants us to pay Enron, an outright fraud, are not in our interest.

The political scene is more depressing. State elections in UP, Punjab, Uttaranchal and Manipur have shown how parochialism and patronage, either in the name of caste, religion or region, has come to enthuse people. Leaders have only played upon the differences to get vote. Narrow thinking is deepening. It happens when idealism loses its élan. In such an environment, the seedy elements come to the fore. With mediocre political leadership and inefficient corrupt bureaucracy, it is difficult to improve the governance, particularly when to stay in power has become the end.

acue. Its yearly growth of 2.5 per cent has shrunk to 1.3 per cent. In the countryside, where the incidence of unemployment is the highest, the poor are getting increasingly marginalised. In the cities, a clerk's post gets 200 applications. There are schemes to alleviate poverty or give doles for relief or other works. But no government, either at the centre or in the states, has any scheme to create jobs. In fact, they are retiring employees compulsorily. Trade unions are understandably up in arms.

Once I told Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee that Lal Bahadur Shastri insisted on the planning Commission's spelling out projects in jobs, not allocations. Vajpayee saw the point but said that the trend in the world was to have more and

aftermath of the election weeks before the BNP took control of the government. But these are attributed more to political reprisals and criminal motives than to any communal passions. It must be remembered that but for the fore warning by Prime Minister Khaleda Zia not to celebrate the victory rejoicing, the pent up outpourings of joy and anger by BNP activists against their political adversaries might have created a worse situation. It was palpably unfair to blame the BNP government for whatever might have taken place during the transitional lame duck caretaker government. The situation was blown out of proportion as was admitted then by the West Bengal chief minister Buddhadev Bhattacharya.

But fed constantly by the propaganda of Awami League and some of its media sympathisers on the alleged persecution and migration of minority Hindus, the Indian Press, Parliament, the Congress party and others came out with angry reaction. The RSS, the militant Hindu organization together with the BJP launched a vigorous anti-Bangladesh smear campaign internationally on the minority issue in Bangladesh to drum up support in favour of boycotting Bangladesh business particularly in garments. Prime Minister Vajpayee expressed concern at the reported migration of minority Hindus to India from Bangladesh. There were almost daily anti-Bangladesh angry dem-

onstrations in front of Bangladesh Missions in New Delhi and Calcutta. The EU Ambassadors made known their concern about the minority issue. The Amnesty International expressed their displeasure on the matter. Other international human rights groups noted the allegation with shock and dismay. Foreign aid which is tied to human rights record was thrown into jeopardy. In short what were ordinarily a few localised and temporary incidents were successfully internationalised to the detriment of national interest. Bangladesh suffered loss of its image and credibility as a tolerant society and a liberal democracy and a moderate Muslim state and became suspect in the eyes of international community, thanks to the propaganda campaign. After having played up successfully the minority card externally the party is now directing its campaign on the alleged pro-Pakistan and fundamentalist character of the government and indulging in what is proverbially known as 'cutting one's nose to spite one's face'.

This is a serious challenge to Bangladesh diplomacy faced with two pronged attack on the issue of minority and a government of alleged fundamentalist persuasion and needs deft, instant and focused handling as a measure of damage control to promote national interest. The disclaimer to Buddhadev Bhattacharja's baseless and unfounded allegation was a trifle

delayed and should have been more immediate and forthright to dispel all doubts and misgivings. However, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's statement in the Jatiya Sangsad on the minority issue was reassuring, appropriate and timely when she said "Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Christians, people of all faith are living in this country and will continue to live here. All of us together have achieved independence for our country. And together we will establish communal harmony". To take the wind out of the sails of propaganda on the human rights issue, the government should expedite the process of implementing its policy of separation of Judiciary from the Executive and expeditiously put in place the proposed National Human Rights Commission. The repeal of the infamous Public Safety Act will strengthen the human rights credential of the government. Any attempt to portray the country as a theocratic state must be vigorously denied and rejected. The inclusion of two right wing Jamaat ministers in the cabinet does not make the government any more fundamentalist than the BJP government in India which preaches Hindutva or the right wing Freedom Party coalition government in Austria. Without feeling in the least apologetic, the government should send out the message that far from being Taliban controlled it follows the policy and principles of liberal

democracy, believes in the dignity of women and upholds their rights, privileges and empowerment and has not foisted Taliban values and agenda on the people by introducing Sharia law governed by Fatwa of the Mullahs. And that the government attests to its commitments to all UN conventions against terrorism and condemns the terrorist attack on the United States, the Indian Parliament and the US Cultural Centre in Calcutta.

The recent controversy over a sermon by Obaidul Huq, the Imam of Baitul Mukarram mosque in presence of President Badruddoza Chowdhury criticising the US role in Afghanistan and the disparaging remark by Jamaat minister Delwar Hossain Saidi regarding statues in the country, reminiscent of the destruction of Buddha icons at Bamiyan in Afghanistan, gave rise to suspicion about the alleged reactionary character of the government. The government must remain vigilant and alert to plug all such holes of suspicion about its alleged extreme right leanings without much delay.

The Awami League, the main opposition political party, would do well not to confuse its wrath and hatred against the government with the national interest. It will serve the interest of its political future best by treading the path of tolerance, decency and democratic dissent.

Abdul Hannan is a former Press Counsellor, Bangladesh UN Mission in New York

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

### "Wrong wording in Rabindra Sangeet"

Mrs. Rezawana Chowdhury Bannya has all the necessary qualities, which she has earned by hard labour and practice and devotion, to be considered as one of the best Rabindra Sangeet singers. It is a well-established fact that she is the most renowned and enlightened singer of Rabindra Sangeet both in Bangladesh and also in West Bengal. She is not only a famous singer but also a dignified person and that is the reason why she earns respect from all the Rabindra Sangeet lovers throughout the world.

From the approach of the letter of Mr. Nazmul Karim it is well understood that his only intention was to defame Rezawana Chowdhury Bannya. It is clear that it is a conspiracy against her to downgrade her status.

Why Mr. Nazmul Karim has used so rude and attacking language in his letter against Bannya? Mr. Nazmul Karim writes that he found out the mistake one decade ago but may I ask him why he did not mention this when he discovered the mistake? Lastly, we the thousands of fans of Bannya want to assure her that we

will always be beside her and she is not alone in her fight against her enemies who has declared "Tagore: War on a Word." against her.

**Iqbal Hossain**  
*Chittagang*

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I refer to the letter by Mr. Nazmul Karim (February 06). Now is the time for the highbrows and enlightened gang in our cultural arena of both in West Bengal and Bangladesh to open up their eyes. They must understand that we the listeners have our views too.

I must say that Mr. Nazmul Karim has done a commendable job by elucidating the readers (listeners) by pointing out, in a very clear and understandable manner, a wrong word in a Rabindra Sangeet sung by Rezawana Chowdhury Bannya. Let's face it—a mistake is a mistake, whether major or minor and whether or not committed by callousness or out of ignorance.

The letter written by Mrs. Lubna Chowdhury (February 12) from California, U.S.A., is confusing. How does she justifies that the lyric "dhar" in place of "dar" is a "simple error" and a "tiny mistake"? Is this error (simple?) acceptable? Where on earth it is natural for the great (professional) singers to often make

mistakes?

If, according to Mrs. Lubna Chowdhury, it is natural for the great (professional) singers to make errors then it is also natural that they will be subjected to criticisms by the listeners. She should know that Rezawana Chowdhury Bannya is a professional singer and not an amateur.

It is surprising that Mrs. Lubna Chowdhury has related this matter to the "wrongs" our politicians are committing every day". But isn't she aware that our political leaders are also publicly condemned and denounced and they are often scolded and punished for their 'wrongs'. So where is the wrong if a listener criticises a professional singer for singing a wrong lyric in a song and that too in a Rabindra Sangeet? A great professional singer like Rezawana Chowdhury Bannya should accept this criticism in a graceful manner.

**Rubaya Naheed**  
*New Jersey, U.S.A*

### War against terrorism

As Mr Bush expands his War against terror to include state sponsored terrorism, I would like to add my appeal.

Jubo Dal neé League, is our

version of state-sponsored repression, extortion and terrorism.

While the world makes loud noises about some Mullahs in Iran and feeble slaps on the wrist for Mugabe's thugs, our Storm Troopers are getting away with it all.

It may appear I am overreacting, but just take a look at the Macoutes of Haiti. We are headed down that road as well while the government practices sitting on its hands.

If the Free World has indeed embarked on a Just Cause, then they should target those governments repressing their own people and not just international terrorists.

**Dorji**  
*Dhaka*

compared our armed forces with the armed forces of Burma. Does he know anything about Burma? The Burmese armed forces are ruling Burma for a long time. But Bangladesh is a democratic country!

How come Mr. MA knows so many things about the officers' mess and staff cars of military officers? Mr. MA should try to learn more about the Indian or American Army and he would see what type of facilities they enjoy from their government.

**Sumit**  
*London, U.K*

### An opinion

We are in the midst of history in the making and a lot of people seem to be failing to see this in context.

General Musharraf in Pakistan is doing something that in post colonial or 20<sup>th</sup> century history is unprecedented.

As far as I have seen, there have been only a handful of military governments that have had any modicum of success.

The first would be Franco's Fascist Spain. Although he destroyed much of the country during the Civil War, subsequently at least Spain was spared from the

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2<sup>nd</sup> World War. Franco, to his credit, managed to keep out the communists and kept the unions in control. Towards the end of his life, he had the sense to see that Spain was again ready and began the process of democratisation by reinstating the King. His legacy, I would say, would be reflected in the success of modern Spain although he was repressive, stifling of artists and intellectuals and abetted in the escape of Nazis after the war.

Second would be the Bolivian coup in 1952. A group of young reformist officers took over to annul an election, which might have opened up the floodgates to the communists. The revolution resulted in the state's seizure of the tin mines and a huge land redistribution. Politically, it resulted in the enfranchisement of the peasants -- when the literacy-voting requirement was eliminated. This event marked the beginnings of self-government and the entrance of most Bolivians into the political and economic life of their country. On the negative side, state interference in economic and political life continued into the 1980's, although in the Latin American context it was quite successful.

The third would be the, possibly CIA sponsored, coup by Augusto Pinochet in Chile. It may be justified in arguing that had the civilian government of Salvatore Allende been allowed to survive, it may have led to the destabilisation of South America. His regime should not be judged in the present light but in the context of his time. Although even then, it may be argued that he was far too brutal. But he achieved his aims of keeping Chile in the American camp and smashing the communists. His successes also helped Brazil and Argentina do the same, with less and more bloodshed respectively.

I would argue that Musharraf in Pakistan is now fighting the new communists, Islamic Fundamentalists. And he is doing it with far less brutality than any of the others I mention here. He is also disengaging the state from the economy and following advice from foreign agencies to modernise his country.

Although the game is not over yet, the prognosis looks good and Pakistan should now be studied, minutely, as a text book case of a military government actually succeeding.

If General Musharraf does succeed, I would argue that he has shown a viable, short term, alternative to corrupt, venal, ineffective and useless democratically elected governments. One comes to mind while I am writing this.

**Bastiat**  
*Dhaka*

### Lack of proof reading

I am one of the serious readers of your daily. However I regret to inform you that there seems to be a lack of interest in proof reading.

I was reading the article "Country can save \$100m a yr if 50pc vehicles in Dhaka, Ctg run on CNG" (14 February), it is no doubt a very informative and an important article as everyone is keenly monitoring the gas issue. But when I reached the concluding paragraph I was disappointed to see that the last line incomplete.

May I request you that more time be spent by the proofreaders to give a complete and mistake free article to the satisfaction of the readers.

**Billy I Ahmed**  
*Dhaka*