

DHAKA SATURDAY MARCH 20, 2004

Agri inputs crisis

PM's intercession needed

HE Jatiya Sangsad committee going into fertiliser and diesel crises has, in effect, underlined the lack of coordination between ministries dealing with the situation. For some time past, this paper has been striving to bring into focus the farm inputs issue that might undercut the irri-boro output. In fact, half-way through the cultivation season we had raised the question through a report emanating from our northern region correspondent. This was duly followed by an editorial urging the government to tackle the issue head-on lest the HYV harvest slumped to a new low. For, it might affect the overall cereal production in the country. Irri-boro output being an important component of the food autarky we pride ourselves on, should receive utmost attention, so we pleaded. But now, only a few weeks are left to ensure a good crop and yet the fertiliser and diesel crises show little sign of abating.

Only the other day, we regretted over lack of fertiliser and diesel importation despite an acute scarcity of the items and their spiraling prices. Irri-boro production is critically reliant on irrigation water. Pumps are either diesel or electricity-run, and they can't operate at the optimal level due to shortage of diesel and power shedding. Despite the PM's instructions for an immediate importation of potash, no consignment seemed in sight. Similarly the energy ministry has yet to respond to the agriculture ministry's request for an early import of diesel to help irrigate boro plots.

There is no doubt whatsoever that farmers need subsidies on 'all inputs including potash, diesel and seeds' as the agriculture minister has rightly pointed out. Why is the finance ministry dragging its foot on the SOS call for grant of subsidies to the irri-boro farmers?

There is sufficient ground to convene an interministerial, if not a cabinet, meeting to draw up a contingency strategy to resolve the inputs crisis dogging irri-boro productivity. We believe, the PM has to step in to make a difference in the situation.

Threat to a journalist

State protection should be provided

HE death threat to the chief reporter of Bengali weekly Shaptahik 2000 is not just another glaring example of intimidation but also an acid test for the government to bring the culprits to justice. We agree with Golam Mortoza that this was not just 'an isolated incident'. Sending a packet to Golam Mortoza containing a burial shroud and letter with death threat followed by a telephone call shows that an organised campaign against the freedom of pressmen is on, and in full swing. We are shocked at the audacity of the anonymous caller who told him that the reward for writing against certain groups was death.

Golam Mortoza has been a fearless reporter, always vocal against injustices in society -- be it religious fundamentalism or minority repression or criminal underworld and its links with politics. His investigative reports and books on these issues have always been appreciated. Therefore, perhaps he need not worry. But then witnessing the fate of other similar journalists, mainly Manik Saha of Khulna, of late one would think twice before telling him not to take it seriously Can the authorities protect him from these vicious groups? Can anyone actually ensure his safety? Probably not -- simply because none of the earlier cases of journalists' killing has been resolved to date. We think that a routine investigation by the police should be enough to trace the caller and charge him. What's interesting is the Prime Minister's comments on the report by Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). The PM on Wednesday categorically rejected the CPJ report where it had said that Bangladesh was the most violent country for journalists in Asia. The government claimed to have taken immediate actions to track down the offenders and bring charges against them. But we are yet to witness any of the criminals, in the sensational cases at least, has been punished. Therefore would it be too wrong to assume that even in the case of Golam Mortoza the offenders might not get caught? However, we would like to be proved wrong on it.

Poverty reduction in South Asia

of global trade had increased but only to the modest level of 0.9 percent. Apparently, despite some gains in India, the region's share in the burgeoning FDI into developing countries remains virtually unchanged.

Comparably, SAARC countries have been more successful in accessing overseas employment. India and Bangladesh are in the top 10 recipients of workers' remittances. Sri Lanka and Pakistan are also not too far behind. While

around 37 per cent but with large variations within the region. Only Sub-Saharan Africa compares to such a poverty level. Comparably, East Asia, Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean have poverty rates in the region of 15 per cent. Surprisingly, it was mentioned that in terms of national poverty incidence, the poverty rate had declined to a varying degree in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka but had increased in Pakistan over the 1990s

mortality rate in the region has dropped from 148 to 94 deaths per 1000 births in 2000, a drop of 54 deaths per 1000 births in a span of ten years. Even here, however, there are large variations -- from a low of 19 deaths per 1000 births in Sri Lanka to 110 deaths per 1000 births in the case of Pakistan. Fortunately, the rate of progress appears to have been much faster for Bangladesh and Nepal. Within the generic infant mortality sector. Bangladesh appears to have also outpaced Pakistan in terms of

unless we also address the 'structural rigidities and complexity of the socio-cultural environments' in South Asia.

What is probably needed is systematic and rational prioritisation of strategy. The vorkshop, after lengthy discussion and debate was able to identify such an approach. The agreed list included -- mobilising the latent power of the poor, prudent macroeconomics, mainstreaming the informal economy, enhancing

gender and other equities,

sustainable development and

effective co-operation among the

I believe that there exists many

obstacles to participatory poverty

management in our region. They

can however be overcome. What

we need to do is to have an

institutional approach rather than

the politicisation of governance.

We also need to rid our social

framework of the criminalisation

of politics. In this context, it would

greatly help if we could remove the

existing nexus between bank

defaulters and the political

leaderships in different countries.

This factor is definitely perpetuat-

making and policy formulation,

accountability and competition --

all these factors have to be

introduced, if poverty reduction is

Transparency in decision

ing inequities in society.

countries of the region.

the law and order mechanism. Promoting local governance and enhancing credibility and trust in administrative intention through demonstrative action (prosecution of high profile figures) will also help. It will also mean that scarce resources will not be wasted unnecessarily.

In addition, planners need to carefully identify the 'policy gap.' There appears to be differences in the policymaker's perception of poverty reduction and the physical aspects on the ground. Proper assessment needs to take place about people's skills and their accessibility to resource. Here, in all certainty, political will has to be reflected.

Basic institutional constraints, including land reform, will have to be implemented. This is definitely not only slowing down the rate of growth in agriculture, but also hampering food security and capital formation in rural areas. The spillover effects are also affecting non-farm sectors. Our efforts need to be on a two-

track format. National efforts towards poverty reduction needs to be strengthened through a regional approach. A South Asian Data Base on Poverty Reduction Best Practices could be the first step in this direction. Experience sharing could also take place in the poverty-relevant areas like natural calamities and disaster mitigation strategies. This could be further widened (later on) by also including sharing of research details of life saving drugs. Our region has many commonalties as well as differences. There are many difficult problems -- some with complex dimensions. However, despite the despair of statistics related to poverty, a poverty-free South Asia is not an impossible dream. We have to realise that it is our collective responsibility.

to take place in South Asia. Such a course will strengthen the rule of Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary law and encourage the unfolding of

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POST BREAKFAST

telephone mainlines per 1000 people has more than trebled in the region between 1985 and 2000, South Asia home to 23 per cent of the world's population, still has less than 1 per cent of internet users

Several economists observed that poverty had declined both in terms of depth and severity but the rate of decline had been modest. It was also pointed out that disparity had been noticed in the status of decline. This trend in turn had created rising inequalities and fuelled social conflicts. The ratio of income share of the richest 20 per cent to that of the poorest 20 per cent varies from 4 in Bangladesh to 5 in India. In lay-man's term, greater economic integration into the world economy has yet to be translated into sustained growth for the majority of the South Asian countries

global realities which 'carry both opportunities and risks.' In this Data can be most revealing. The context it was outlined that the current status of dollar-a-day region's share of exports as a share poverty incidence in South Asia is

ameliorated the situation. There was good news in the primary education sector. Net primary enrolment ratio in South Asia averaged at around 77 per cent in 1997 compared to 64 per cent in 1980. This indicated an under one per cent annual rate of increase. There were however wide variations across countries with regard to adult literacy. Sri Lanka and Maldives have attained nearuniversality on this indicator and are way ahead of the pack. Adult literacy rate in 2000 for South Asia

However, we all know that

The news was slightly better in

income cannot be the only It was clear from the workshop measure of poverty. There are that South Asia presents many other factors that might have challenges. It was stressed time and again that we need to find the right balance between growth and welfare objectives, between a proactive role for the state while minimising its involvement in actual implementation and also between embracing the opportunities of the global market-place while resisting the inequities and asymmetries of the globalisation process

improvement.

In this context, regional experts reiterated that a more realistic approach to economic growth was necessary. One would tend to agree with such an idea. We should accept the critical importance of economic growth for faster poverty reduction but at the same time, we need to pay greater attention to the poverty-growth interface. Growth by itself will be inadequate in dealing with the multidimensional problems of poverty

Politics of destruction and intimidation Is there a way out?

SALEH TANVEER

THE other day, there was a news item that quotes the leader of BNP student outfit "We have a party decision to resist Badruddoza and his supporters wherever we find them." He went on to say "Be sure, the JCD will spare none of them and make sure they are duly punished for betraying with Ziaur Rahman (founder of the BNP)"... 'The JCD will not compromise on dealing with national traitors."

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

Centre for Policy Studies (SACEPS)

and the Centre for Policy Dialogue

(CPD). The meeting, which was in

two parts, dealt with some of the

vital issues that are faced on a

regular basis by the region's

economists and development

planners. Regional experts from

India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and

Bangladesh identified various

factors that continue to thwart

poverty reduction in South Asia.

thought-provoking.

The discussion was interesting and

Statistics referred to in the

course of the meeting indicated

that South Asia had made

important gains in the fight against

poverty. Nevertheless, while there

had been specific areas of progress.

the idea of freeing the population

from the chains of poverty as

identified in the Millennium

Development Goal (MDG) ---

halving the number of poor by 2015

-- still remains a distant dream. It

appears that such an ambitious

possibility might arrive sometime

after 2025, and that too if other

Participants pointed out that

South Asian countries face new

things fall into place.

HERE was recently an

interesting workshop in

Dhaka. It was convened

jointly by the South Asia

This is not merely an isolated statement from a wayward `lathial'', but is reflective of the tascist tendencies that have crept into our national politics over the last few decades. Each successive government seems to have set new records for intolerance and criminalisation of politics. The party faithful responds to criticisms by pointing out the lows of the past government. The partisan dialogue is not whether a particular behaviour is abhorrent or not--it's always about the scale of the outrage-- is it any worse or better than past ones inflicted by

the other party?

will with brute force, with no reprimands from party higher-ups, and with apparent collusion of the police force present at the scene. During the last government's tenure, we saw uncontrolled criminal behavior by an Awami League stalwart in beating up and maiming a journalist. These are only a few examples as one can cite many other instances. As much as the general populace is sick and tired of what's going around them, they find themselves

tions, without paying a political price. When public servants lose their jobs or are given unpalatable postings for being on the wrong side of the political divide, it sends a chilling message to the rest for not colluding with the right party. The politicisation of institutions has become fairly complete and has bereft us with an effective brake, as democracy continues its steady decline to complete dysfunction. The effect of the intellectuals has been significantly neutralized since a vast number of a numbe

have found it convenient to shelter criminals, as their muscle is considered indispensable in winning elections. Yet, there appears too little political price paid for such association. People seem to vote for the lesser of the two evils. Awami League, despite the widely publicised excesses, got more votes in '01 election than in '96; its landslide loss was a result of BNP successfully aligning itself with other parties. It will not be surprising if BNP wins, if it can hold

stake in the political process. The main political parties know this and are unable to offer anything new. Hence, one observes an excessive reliance in conjuring up past icons in the hope of basking in reflected glory. This is the same reason why politicians have to depend on musclemen to project the strength of their parties, since there is so little spontaneous support

Our current moribund state of politics can potentially be stirred

violence directed at a nascent political movement. There can be no short cuts; no embracing of criminal elements for the sake of political expediency. The people involved have to work together, keeping in mind the broader goals, and not succumb to personal differences. Politics will have to be more about vision, goals and plans, and less about personal gains.

Sooner or later, I feel that this must happen. As society slides down in its current path, more and more people will be directly affected by violence, lawlessness and intimidation. The price of not doing anything will become

as a whole was however only 55.6 per cent indicating that 44 out of 100 South Asian adults were still illiterate. The other worrving aspect was that within such illiteracy, there was a strong gender disparity: of every three adult illiterates, two are female.

the health sector. The under-5

In the recent past, we have seen attempts on the life of a noted author Humayun Azad, apparently because of unflattering accounts on the role of some party, now in the seat of power, during the liberation war. In the name of protecting the unity of BNP, we see BNP enthusiasts enforcing their

Our current moribund state of politics can potentially be stirred up by the rise of a third political party; if indeed it can capture the imagination of millions of effectively disenfranchised people. But, certain things have to be just right. One has to hope that a leadership with charisma, good political instincts and fearless disposition will emerge that will instill hopes for a better future.

helpless in stopping this downward slide. Even the sane elements within each of the main political parties are unable to control the agenda of their own parties, that appear to have been taken over by zealous young Turks, aided and abetted by criminal elements.

How did we get ourselves into this mess?

Democracy is functional only when its institutions are functional. Yet, every government since independence seems to have done its part to damage these instituthem have aligned themselves to one or the other side of the AL-BNP too often, such activities have been

tolerated for personal or political expediency. Too many have come to accept the notion that the ends justify the means.

Politicians and political parties

of its coalition partners, regardless of its failure to improve law and order or engaging in political intimidation of rivals.

What is a way out ?

The biggest obstacle to reviving democracy and decriminalisation of politics appears to be a considerable dearth of hope. Too often in the past, people have seen their hopes dashed. As a result, cynicism is strong, with loyalty extending not much beyond near and dear ones. In the absence of hope, people do not perceive much

up by the rise of a third political party; if indeed it can capture the imagination of millions of effectively disenfranchised people. But, certain things have to be just right. One has to hope that a leadership with charisma, good political instincts and fearless disposition will emerge that will instill hopes for a better future. Large sections of the hitherto politically inactive sections of the society must feel invigorated sufficiently to be involved, even at the risk of their own lives. Things will not be easy, as is clear from the

comparable to the price of doing something about it. In particular the oft heard refrain "why should I get involved to get killed", is less of an inhibitor when you know people around you have been killed, even as they were simply minding their own lives. This is especially the case, when people see an alternative. In slum areas in the US that have been too often been victimised by drug lords and gangs, once in a while, ordinary people have lost fear and come out in droves to get rid of the criminal elements. Something similar must eventually happen in Bangladesh; people cannot be cowed down by fear indefinitely. We can only hope that we arrive at this stage sooner rather than later.

Saleh Ahmed Tanveer is Professor of Mathematics, The Ohio State University, USA

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

The Spain story

Jose Maria Anzar did not give the slightest weight to or show the slightest respect for the votes the Popular Party received last time. Anzar was perfectly capable of ignoring the fact that 90 per cent of the Spaniards were against the invasion of Iraq that started March 20, 2004. So the voters ousted Anzar who was certain to win a third consecutive term in power in Sunday's poll. "Spain punishes the PP and places its confidence in Zepatero", said Spanish El Mundo newspaper on March 15 in its front page. It was the first time in Spain's modern democratic history that a party had lost power after holding an absolute majority.

Anzar's fall is the first sign of the fall of a doctrine that Bush promoted world-wide a year ago when he ordered the invasion of Iraq on fake allegations against Saddam Hussein, and that too supported by Anzar, Blair and others. With Bush facing reelection later this year, this unprecedented swing in the Spanish ballot is an eye opener. While Zapatero received congratulations from French President Jacques Chirac, South African

President Thabo Mbeki and other

world leaders, Bush is yet to make a call. Poland and Denmark, other US allies in Iraq till today who contributed soldiers in Iraq, were notable others who gave cool shoulders to Zapatero's win.

Zapatero's recent remarks are interesting. He said both Bush and Blair need 'self criticism'. "You can't bomb a people just in case...you can't organise a war on the basis of lies...wars such as that which has occurred in Iraq only allow hatred, violence and terror to proliferate". Actually, without the invasion of Iraq, people would not have realised their own ability to mobilise themselves. People's 'no' to war world-wide did not serve any purpose in 2003, but it is doubtless be useful in 2004.

Sirajul Islam Social sciences researcher and consultant.

thinking. We hate and protest the

Pisciculture Housing Society, Shyamoli, Dhaka

DU in quagmire Dhaka University is deadlocked for a long time. To protest the heinous attack on Humayun Azad, DUTA decided to boycott class. The attack on Mr Azad is nefarious and culpable. It is a slap on free

barbaric and cowardly act. The demand of DUTA is lawful and due. The govt should meet the demands to salvage the image of our country. The culprits are at large, but political opponents are harassed The govt should have sent Mr Azad abroad for better treatment that

might diminished tension and soothed the protestors. The authority keeps mum while the general students of DU are victimised. Our future is uncertain, but we are enjoying holidays with qualms. I urge the authority concerned to address the matter mindfully and rescue our academic life.

Molla Mohammad Shaheen Dept of English, Dhaka University

Women should be directly elected

Patriarchy is the basis of our society where women have to confront various social discriminations. To a large extent, female are subject to brutal torture from their male counterparts. Dowry, child marriage, illiteracy are endemic in our society. Unabated numbers of problems make their life misera-Our constitution stipulates the

equal rights of women with men in Article 28(2). Nevertheless, we could hardly find any conspicuous improvement in their social life. Political empowerment of women is a burning issue for a long time. We have observed that erstwhile governments in a bid to elevate their position provided reserved seats in parliament for women. Provision of 15 reserved seats for women members was in original constitution. Later on, through 5th and 10th amendments, the number of the seats was increased from 15 to 30 and the period was extended to 2001. But, they were selected by fellow members.

In my opinion, this process was an appalling one because people of the constituency didn't get any opportunity to elect their delegate. Sometimes, she wasn't wellknown in her constituency. Bulk of people remained detached from her. Eventually, their woes were unheeded in most cases. In fact, they were in parliament but no prolific result had been found. Ironically, their seats were considered as ornamental for the parliament. They were nothing more than puppet of their fellow party members as they were accountable to them but not to the mass. In practice, they were

selected for the purpose of consolidating position of the ruling party in parliament. It should be mentioned that there is no such reserved seats in present parliament. Recently, incumbent government is going to reinstate the same process once again allocating 45 reserved seats through 14th amendment. It is like 'old wine in new bottle".

It is apparent that this process of 'selection' frustrates the real purpose of women's empowerment in all respects. Political empowerment can only be possible if provision of direct election is inserted in our constitution. Women should be given every opportunity to choose their representative for them in parliament. As a result, she has to be accountable them. As such, they will feel more confident under her leadership. So, we earnestly urge the government that they will introduce direct election system in place of selection system with a

Department of Law, DU

We are grief-stricken

students, nine from Khulna University and two from BUET, in the Bay at Sunderbans is so tragic that it has made us numb with shock and sorrow. What a heartbreaking incident; why did this to happen? Those youngsters went to enjoy life but fate decided otherwise.

Everyone must be warned that it is dangerous to bathe in the sea when it is in ebb, no one should ignore it and try to be adventurous. Our deep sympathy to the families who lost their sons and daughter. May the Almighty Allah give them strength to bear this loss agony. We are praying for the salvation of the departed souls.

Nurjahan

Chittagong

Dr. B vs government

I just cannot reconcile if the govt. of Bangladesh has started a crusade against Dr. B. Chowdhury and his 'alternative stream'; if so, why? I have been a staunch follower of Zia and well-wisher of the BNP headed by Madam Zia, but cannot support the current hot-headed machination by any 'storming' party! I do not see any wrong doing if Dr. B, a gentle and honest citizen of the

country (forgetting for a while that he is a former President of the country), having an alternative thinking decided to float his own movement to endeavour for a terror-free, corruption-less and a democratic Bangladesh for the greater interest of the people -- in the name of whom, however, everyone belonging to BNP, AL or JP indulge in politics. If we vouch that human rights, freedom of speech do exist in our country, why then we try to quash someone's right to express and spoil their meeting by attacking with stones and sticks? At least such activities do not speak of any quality on the part of the govt. It's sad and unacceptable that Dr. B's podium and microphones were reportedly vandalised at 'Muktangan' -- the venue which is free for all. (And apprehension of mishaps and procurement of special permission

did not help Dr. B. in going about

It's all the more deplorable and

distressing to learn that the

proposed party's Secretary General

Major (retd) Mannan was under

more severe attack and threat by

hoodlums and cadres of JCD! But

why? Can he not choose to join any

party in politics as a free citizen of a

free country? Can I not support or

his democratic activities)!

belong to any party of my free choice: why should I not be allowed to express my feeling or allegiance with dignity? No, such things (as we read in newspapers) can no more be allowed to continue in our beloved motherland, for which we fought and sacrificed millions. Perhaps one day this sleeping nation will wake up again and shed more blood, if yet necessary.

I wonder what the govt. has to say when bombs are hurled at Dr. B's clinic and Major Mannan's residence or his industries are shut down by the ruling party activists. How you and me can feel safe in such an insecure situation as an ordinary citizen? I fail to understand if such govt. backed attacks on opponents can bring any good to the administration or these sorts of unconstitutional and uncivilised behaviour would add another feather to its cap of failures? According to your news coverage, how sad it is that there was official decision to give a hard time to the 'alternative political stream' of Dr. B. I also fail to understand under what norm the BNP led govt. could (reportedly) so decide. May Allah

rescue them and save this nation.

AFRahman

Dhaka

governance **Bivuti Tarafder**

view to establishing better

The news of the death of 11

EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

political divide. When hoodlums, in the guise of students, beat up other students or faculty, it is an attack on the institution--it should not matter if those committing the crime belong to one party or the other or what the political persuasion of the victims are. Yet,