

Lacklustre corporations and municipalities

City government may be the answer

It is very hard to differ with the recommendation put forward by the Municipal Association of Bangladesh suggesting measures to make the city corporations and the municipalities more performance oriented.

The performance of the municipalities insofar as it relates to providing the municipal services, leaves much to be desired. More often than not their programmes have been stifled by inadequate and not-in-time assistance from the government.

We are also appalled at the dismal lack of coordination and planning in the work of the municipal corporations, which leave the city dwellers to the mercy of the unplanned and random work programmes of various public utility bodies that work independently of one another.

The reason for wasteful and unplanned utility works is due to the absence of a single authority to govern the service providers like, gas water, and electricity. Each of these organisations works on its own agenda and budget quite oblivious of what the other provider of public utility service is doing.

While the municipalities are under the LGED the other service providers are under not one but different ministries. The duality of control hampers performance of the local bodies. Things are compounded even further when politics influences grant of government largesse to the municipalities. It is no secret that commissioners not belonging to the party in power are not granted the 'favour' that those commissioners belonging to the government party get. The undercurrent of friction that exists between elected mayors belonging to the 'other' party and the government is common knowledge.

It is therefore worthwhile to consider not only investing the municipalities with more power and money, establishment of city governments for the municipal areas of the capital and other large metropolis of Bangladesh need to be given urgent consideration by the government. The idea is not new. It was floated many times before, but not considered important enough to merit in the national agenda.

For the sake of efficiency and preventing wasteful expenditure it is time our policy makers gave the idea a serious thought.

Expatriate workers in trouble

Why do they continue to be exploited?

IT'S unfortunate that around 700 Bangladeshi workers lost their chances to fly and work for a factory in Namibia because of agitation by some fellow workers already in that country. Though the details are sketchy, it appears that around 300 Bangladeshi workers attacked the managers of the factory they were working at in protest of poor accommodation facilities and less salary than agreed before. They were apparently recruited by a Malaysia based textile giant to work in its factories in Namibia.

The incident has raised few questions in our mind. Though we do not support the unruly behaviour by the Bangladeshi workers in a foreign land, why they resorted to such extreme actions in the first place is a question one cannot ignore. Stories of exploitation of workers on foreign shores are not new. Not getting paid according to the contract, being treated shabbily by the employers -- these are common allegations by many expatriate workers. A nexus between the recruitment agencies and the employers in this regard was alleged to have been responsible for such exploitation. The authorities pledged to take steps to contain it, but as the Namibia incident shows, it is still continuing.

Our main concern is whether the Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment and the embassies abroad jointly monitor the circumstances in which the workers live, whether the conditions in their contract are being fulfilled, whether they are being subjected to any exploitation. Because had there been some sort of accountability in the process, we are sure incidents such as Namibia's wouldn't have occurred. Our belief is reinforced by the immediate reaction by the ministry to the 'undisciplined behaviour' by the workers. We were not surprised that the ministry failed to recognise the probable reasons for such conduct by workers before straightforwardly blaming them for it. Had it been more active in addressing the grudges of the workers earlier, especially since reports of trouble were filtering in from May, the situation may not have turned so difficult to handle.

Better governance in Afghanistan



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

how the vote takes place in far away Afghanistan -- with chaos and violence or order and normalcy -- will have a significant effect on President George W Bush's electoral fortunes. It is true that the Democrat Presidential candidate John Kerry did not refer to Afghanistan in his acceptance speech, but, apparent failure in the Afghan polls will definitely be drawn upon to strengthen his arguments against the Republican President.

Unfortunately, the continuing lack of security in Afghanistan is being

coalition policy objectives regarding re-construction in Afghanistan have fallen short on the ground.

Failure during 2002, to extend the reach of the international security force outside Kabul, and providing insufficient funding for reconstruction were seen as negative elements in the equation. The fact that there was also less urgency in the efforts to demobilise Afghan militia did not help. Many Afghan citizens whom I have met in recent visits abroad have suggested that after Iraq, the USA's agenda had different

This inability on the part of the coalition has led to warlords and provincial governors creating their own matrix where they are the real over-lords. Within this political vacuum, they have boosted their own armed capabilities and expanded their areas of influence.

This perceived weakness of President Hamid Karzai in Kabul and the restricted vision on the part of the United States have also encouraged farmers in Afghanistan to seek the farming of alternative cash crops like poppy. This country,

bound to lead to frustration and anger among the common people who will blame the government in Kabul and also their supporters. The dormant fundamentalists might again take advantage of the situation.

The coalition partners need to realise that such indicators are not healthy. They are causes for concern if the objective of the present political process is to ensure stability and economic development.

The situation has really come to a boil. Failure to expand the reach of

amongst them, Ismael Khan, the warlord in control of Herat has taken some positive steps to improve transport and communication within his region and to provide electricity in some areas. This has however not reduced his alleged association with drug trafficking. It is exactly this sort of individual effort that needs to be discouraged by the Coalition and steps taken to bring such individual action within the fold of the central hierarchy. There is no replacement for an institutional and integrated approach.

The US Administration and the EU probably believe that the next election in October will resolve many outstanding issues, including the bitter ethnic divide between the Pashtuns, the Tajiks and the Uzbeks in Afghanistan. There will probably be some sharing of powers and a degree of compromise within the fold. However, unless visible prosperity is in evidence in areas and regions outside Kabul, the spill-over arising out of the election will at best be marginal. Kabul may be awash with new internet cafes, electronic equipment, young girls shuffling to school and bright yellow cabs, but one swallow does not make a summer.

If the process of democracy is to take roots in Afghanistan and if chaos and terror are to be banished, there is only one path to follow -- tackle the warlords and extend the reach of security beyond Kabul. Let there also be responsible decentralisation of governance which relies more on economic support and job creation than on arms.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

POST BREAKFAST

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twinned with the prevailing instability in Iraq. Given the spate of violence that has erupted in various parts of the Middle East and in many other locations in the world, one would tend to agree with recent comments by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan who has stated that the world is not safer than it was a few years ago. This is also being reflected in the nervousness being exhibited by both the USA and the UK with regard to potential threats.

The coalition is now at the cross roads in Kabul. The USA had a short, successful and incisive victory in their war against the Taliban forces in December, 2001. In all probability, the US Administration was misled with the ease with which victory was achieved.

Since then, many have watched with disappointment how stated

priorities. They have also been critical of the differences that have surfaced with regard to policy decisions pertaining to Afghanistan between the US State Department and the US Department of Defence. These on-again and off-again moves in Afghanistan have affected governance in that country. It has, as many analysts have pointed out, encouraged Afghan warlords to tighten their grip on the provincial power structure and thumb their noses at the central government in Kabul. This has also thwarted the growth of a central government and the evolution of a common national infrastructure. This in turn has affected the principles of upholding rule of law in the outlying areas and the growth of a national economic planning model through state institutions.

instead of being safer for the rest of the world after the departure of the Taliban, now supplies 75 per cent of the world's opium. The warlords are happy because this provides them with the required revenue that fails to come their way from the central government in Kabul. UN Agencies are now saying that the situation has further deteriorated this year, and drug traffickers in Afghanistan have now started to also produce heroin.

Such a scenario would also imply

the growth of global connections and criminal nexus associated with trans-border crimes like smuggling, gun-running and money laundering.

This is indeed a dangerous and volatile cocktail. In effect we are back to square one. This will most definitely enhance tension and also increase corruption. Such a brew is

OPINION

Bangladesh's trade problems with India

TAYEB HUSAIN writes from Lund, Sweden

RECENTLY, Bangladesh's Foreign Minister complained publicly that India is depriving his country of its fair share of more than \$1 billion in bilateral trade every year. India exports more than \$1 billion worth of goods to Bangladesh every year, but buys less than \$100 million worth in return. How is this possible? The minister says that India blocks Bangladeshi goods through tariff and non-tariff barriers.

The export-import business has two edges. However, exporting anything is a difficult job, but for importing goods is a relatively very simple matter. One needs to have money to pay and one must keep both eyes wide open to find out where one can get goods at highly competitive prices.

What does Bangladesh buy from India? Eggs and onions and carrots and khashar dal I presume. I do not mean to suggest that India does not produce some sophisticated products. Surely she does, but Bangladesh's imports from India are mainly some very basic agricultural and industrial products that the country, if it does not produce herself, can import from anywhere and at anytime. But unfortunately, that is not happening and the result is the huge trade imbalances in India's favour.

turbulence, the country maintained five to eight plus percent growth rate for such a long time. Government, politicians, "chanda" collecting student leaders, and above all, our highly corrupt bureaucrats have made the business environment in the country extremely risky and unreliable. It is a bizarre phenomenon that the Bangladeshi market is full of Indian goods that the country can produce very easily. Things would have been quite different if producers in Bangladesh could feel safe to invest and produce the goods the country need every day. Is it not strange that Bangladesh imports or smuggles fish, eggs,

result is that prices of all foreign goods in Bangladesh become very high and the market is distorted. Let me explain why it is so.

When a Bangladeshi importer imports goods from India legally, the exporter in India often gets export subsidy from the Indian government (sometimes up to 25 per cent of the actual price). Thus, he can sell his goods much cheaper to a foreign buyer and that is quite a normal practice in cases of exporting goods from developing countries. But when a smuggler buys the same product from the exporter in India, he pays the market price including the local taxes, as there is no export

vegetables, etc. from India? Legal imports from India are \$1 billion as the minister said and this does not include the cost of the smuggled goods.

By their heinous activities, the smugglers not only deprive Bangladesh her customs revenue, they also pay higher prices while buying goods from local markets in India, which the consumer in Bangladesh pay in the long run. The ultimate

subsidy for the seller in this circumstance. The seller in such a situation can never offer better prices to a smuggler than to a legal importer.

Thus, smuggling is beneficial

only to the smugglers and their partners such as local politicians, corrupt police and other government officials at the cost of the country's economic interests. Smuggled goods are freely available in the Bangladeshi market and

ences, not from the legal point of view, but certainly as a bad business partner.

Now, what should Bangladesh do under these circumstances?

Surely not talk big as the minister did instead of getting our own house in order. In the beginning of my write-up I said that the goods Bangladesh imports from India, she could buy from anywhere at anytime and unfortunately, it was

enmity with India for that. So far as business is concerned, we should be open and in constant vigil to get the very best that business offers.

Good businessmen in Bangladesh can open a joint import concern with their own capital for all sorts of imports.

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not happening. The reason is again very simple and clear.

Nobody in Bangladesh dares to take the great risk involved in importing large quantities of goods to Bangladesh. Transport costs are higher to get goods from a distant place and buying small quantities from a far away country is not feasible. Thus, India is the easy option, if not necessarily a better one, for buying goods for the Bangladeshi importers.

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the market requirements of different goods, importing them at the right time and in the right quantity at highly competitive prices should not be a problem. Believe it or not, Bangladesh can import various items from countries like Denmark, Sweden, Germany, and France in Europe and from southern countries Australia and New Zealand at cheaper prices than from India. The only criterion to achieve this goal is that Bangladesh can pay for the goods for the Bangladeshi importers.

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TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



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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.

BNP protests

RAB action?

I was reading the report in The Daily Star of September 12, 2004 titled "Eight bullets put end to Ahmudya

episode: BNP men barricade road to Cox's Bazar in protest". I thought the news itself was a joke indeed. Here is the excerpt of the story I found funny:

"...A faction of Satkania BNP yesterday demonstrated protesting the death of Ahmudya. They put up barricade on the Chittagong-Cox's Bazar Road but withdrew it within half an hour following police intervention..."

I found this news a joke indeed for two reasons:

1. BNP is putting up barricades and protesting what? It's own government?

2. They are protesting RAB killing of Ahmudya. Who is Ahmudya? The district's top terrorist!

Mehzabin Ahmed
Lafayette College, USA

Terrorist attacks and Bangladesh

Bangladesh has been victim to terrorists' bomb attacks in several places all over the country for the

last several years.

Gopalganj and Khulna and many people were killed. Why did Sheikh Hasina fail to bring the terrorists to book or resign?

Now when the BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia is the Prime Minister terrorists' bomb attacks are going on one after another in Mymensingh, Sylhet, Tangail and Dhaka. Why does Khaleda Zia fail to bring the terrorists to book or resign?

We wonder if the resignation of the head of the government is the solution to fight terrorists, trace out the terrorists and to punish them, failing which a great catastrophe awaits us all.

It is very unfortunate and shocking that whenever and wherever there is any terrorist bomb attack in our country our government and main opposition party accuse each other, the terrorists escape, the heinous crimes remain unsolved and the sufferings of the people continue unabated.

It is an open secret that due to personality clash and power struggle between BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia and Awami League President Sheikh Hasina, whenever any one of them is in power or in opposition, there is no good governance in the country.

When the Awami League President and the present Leader of the Opposition, Sheikh Hasina, was the Prime Minister of Bangladesh there were several terrorists' bomb attacks in Dhaka, Jessor, and

We also feel that due to the fluid political atmosphere and poor law and order situation in the country, accusation and counter accusation by government and opposition -- whether Sheikh Hasina or Begum Khaleda Zia is in power or in opposition -- encourage terrorists to indulge in terrorist activities and to remain untraced and unpunished.

United we stand, divided we fall. Our government and opposition parties, mainly ruling BNP and opposition Awami League, should cooperate with each other to bring the terrorists to book and punish them, failing which a great catastrophe awaits us all.

If for some cogent reasons Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia resigns and quits politics, we feel for the same cogent reasons the Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina may also resign and quit politics. This would pave the way to establish peace, stability and development in the