

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 straightaway 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.

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Better governance in Afghanistan



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THE prospect of a Presidential election in October in Afghanistan has not reduced militant attacks in that country. Suspected Taliban insurgents continue to engage in serious confrontations that require major US air firepower to contain. This has been particularly true in the bordering regions of eastern Afghanistan. Reports indicate that the US led foreign force of 18,000 troops stationed in that war-torn country has continued to face fierce battles with Taliban guerrillas who are alleged to be operating out of sanctuaries located in the tribal belt of Pakistan bordering Afghanistan. Pakistan has however denied such accusations.

Nevertheless, one thing appears to be quite clear. As it stands today, conditions are still far from normal or conducive to the holding of any nation-wide election in Afghanistan. Security for undertaking a polling campaign by different candidates and for casting of votes are both far from satisfactory. Consequently, many are attributing this haste in holding of elections to the other item on the world agenda -- the US Presidential election in November this year.

Like many others, I believe that

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.

POST BREAKFAST

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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 khasharai dai 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 does not produce herself, can import from anywhere and at any-time. 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 Bangladesh 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, 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

ances, 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 from Bangladesh. This concern can raise more capital for financing imports by launching the concern in the share market. Then the import requirements for the country should be calculated very carefully with close co-operation with the ministry of commerce and the top customs officials. Even the foreign minister and his ministry can be associate member of this importing house. Once this concern can raise capital and know 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 she buys. And in exchange, I can assure readers, these countries would give Bangladesh better trade terms and not alms.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

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

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 the terrorists.

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.

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 country.

We have enough experiences from to the Awami League and BNP governments. In the greater interest of the country let the new generation take over the reign of the country to build a better future, peaceful and prosperous for all.

OH Kabir Dhaka

US policy

The blood of Americans killed in the September 11 incident has long been avenged by the senseless murder of innocent civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan. We offered the US people our sympathy, they needed it as much as a wounded hyena needs sympathy before going on a killing spree.

The world has changed no doubt. But the US is no better off. What happened on September 11 was tragic, but it should not be forgotten that the US has deliberately fostered negative feelings in the Muslim world over the last 50 years, through its manipulative back-room diplomacy and its unequivocal support for Israel. When the dividend finally arrived on an autumn morning it was brutal but for the people to wait uncontrollably and indefinitely at the cruelty of it is indicative of faulty perception of reality. The US is a democracy. Yes, politicians are manipulative. But it is the people who elect them. If ignorance is no excuse in the corporate world, it should not be in national life as well. Another 4 years of Boy

George is on the cards, this means bigger deficits and more body bags returning to the US draped in the star spangled banner.

What is termed by the White House as the war on terrorism (a fine smokescreen for indiscriminate land grab for future military camps) was planned way before Sept 11. Sept 11 was useful for George W Bush, just as the Reichstag fire was for a puny Austrian corporal, who also came to power through elections, and not through a disputed one.

Shaquer Rasheed Australia

PM's overture and AL's rebuff

The well orchestrated dastardly attack on the AL rally with explicit motive to assassinate Sheikh Hasina and frontline AL leaders that succeeded in taking twenty lives, including that of Ivy Rahman, shell-shocked the nation. And condemnation poured in an unprecedented profusion from home and abroad. PM Begum Zia was also prompt to express her shock and grief at the heinous attempt and loss of so many lives. She later intended to

see for herself the Opposition Leader at the latter's Sudha Sadan and also made a proposition to sit with her to find ways how to get at the perpetrators and to put a stop to recurrence of such incidents. That was no doubt a good gesture given the general convention of wisdom.

We have had no doubt about the PM's sincerity. But she would have done well to prove her sincerity of purpose if we could see her immediately ordering the Home Minister to take action against the officers in particular of the law enforcing and intelligence agencies (in whose very presence such a carnage was wrought). Neither were they taken to task. (Nothing of that sort was reported to have been done. The police, moreover, were very prompt to arrest the AL supporters who went berserk following bombing of their rally and at the gory plight of their leaders.)

Incidentally, to trace why the PM's broaching was rebuffed, we may recall two of the not too remote incidents when the Opposition leader Sheikh Hasina was outright denied her legitimate right of entry into the CMH to pay a visit to the ailing Prof. Humayun Azad and into the DHOS to pay her last respect to

Commodore Rabbani (who succumbed to terrorists' bullets in Chittagong) and console his bereaved family members. This was a severe blow and shock to the former PM of the country who along with her countrywide supporters felt terribly mortified. She had also received a threat on her life over phone while abroad and the AL urged the government to look into it seriously and afford her necessary security arrangements. But that was snubbed and the feared attack on her life came without any delay. So she felt apportioning blame to the Alliance government for the attack and turned down its offer.

The AL too has to be restrained in words and action against the government. Let us hope the BNP this time will not fail in its avowed pledge to get to the bottom to nab the real culprits without any favour and unearth the conspiracy behind the gruesome attack.

Ahmed Niaz Dhaka