

Elusive HR commission

Resistance from within must be overcome

THE law minister has brought to public a political reality we have been aware of for a long time but seldom seen it underlined by anybody in authority. When he says he had 'great difficulty' convincing his cabinet colleagues of the need for constituting a national human rights commission he is speaking of a certain scuttling tendency within a government towards any highly desirable move. It is confirmation of a harsh truth by an insider putting a question on the sincerity of the commitment made by the ruling BNP in its election manifesto.

The prime minister herself wanted to constitute a national human rights commission with the objective of improving our HR record. But little progress has been made towards setting up the commission in almost three years. The law minister's assertion is a sharp pointer to the yawning gap between what the political parties profess and what they actually practise.

Not that a human rights commission would be a panacea for all human rights violations. But it is admitted on all hands that formation of a HR commission will be a solid step forward in protecting civil liberties. It will benefit the people and the whole legal system as a platform for highlighting violation of people's rights and demanding justice. Moreover, it will help enhance the government's credibility.

That brings us to the issue of the existing laws and their enforcement. The laws that we have are generally good, though some of them seem to be in desperate need of reform. Government edicts and fiats at times impinge on human rights. To put it in clearer terms, there is abuse of power by government including the police, and other special squads and agencies.

Obviously, a country is better off having a human rights commission than without it. Most countries have such a commission. It would be no exaggeration to say that the absence of the commission in Bangladesh has had a highly negative impact on our HR situation. The government as a whole should be responsive to the law minister's express concern, and constitute the HR commission without wasting any more time.

Donors' focus on 'politics'

But governance is a development issue

THE finance minister is in the news again with his latest statement criticising the donor community for focusing more on what he terms political issues than issues of economic development. This focus on so-called political issues has been a long-standing complaint of the government's against the donors, and while we strongly agree in principle with the notion that donors ought not to meddle, much less dictate to us, in internal matters, we cannot agree with the finance minister's characterisation of any criticism that displeases him as having to do with politics.

In the first place, there is nothing that the donor community says that it is not common knowledge within the country as well as abroad. The donors are not the only ones who point to the abuse of power, politicisation of the administration and law enforcement, and corruption as problems. These are points that have been raised by the media and civil society repeatedly and the fact that they are being raised by the donors does not make them any less valid.

And, contrary to the finance minister's statement, issues such as corruption, politicisation, and abuse of power are development issues. It is now well documented that it is the failure of governance that is the principal stumbling block when it comes to the nation's development, and so it is in fact quite appropriate for the donors to continue to focus on this issue. Nor do we find that the donors are critical only of the government and not the opposition, as has been suggested.

Indeed, what makes the minister's words so hard to take seriously is that when the current administration was in opposition, it was the first to use the donors' criticisms against the then government and seemed to give great weight to their pronouncements. The minister's current complaints therefore smack of hypocrisy. In fact, our experience invariably has been that the party in power waxed dismissive about any unsavoury remark by the donor community while that in the opposition elated over it.

In the final analysis, if the government wishes for the donor community to quiet down about 'the internal affairs', the means to accomplish this are in its hands. If the government performed in a manner that was above reproach, then it would no longer have to worry about the indignity of being reproached.



ABDUL BAYES

WHAT'S Economics Worth? is a very recent book that covers various aspects of the economics research industry over a period of time. In one sense, I deem it as a rare book since, unlike other books on economics that I have been through, it deals with the techniques of valuing policy research that economists genuinely grapple with everyday.

Eminent economists Phillip G. Pardey and Vincent H. Smith edited the book that was released by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in 2004.

Foreword and backyard

First, the finely focused foreword by the Director General of IFPRI Joachim von Braun. He seems to lament over the alleged apathetic attitudes of sponsors in funding economics research, despite its profoundly positive impact on the lives of people and on improving the policy making process and policy decisions. Funding agencies, reportedly, are unwilling to fund economics research, probably propelled by the notion that outputs are not tangible like other research,

or even if tangible, they are not worth the pounds in the wallet. But not long ago, economics research received funds at an enviable rate. Thus, surprisingly, nowadays economics research has been pushed back.

"But we, as economists, believe strongly that economics research is worth a great deal is regrettably viewed by research funders and administrators as a less-than-compelling justification for future economics research funding. Public and private sources of research

paradigms are fixed, research is ideology driven, or the market for research quality or policy is malfunctioning."

Size and composition

One of the articles in the book, 'The Economics Research Industry' by Vincent H. Smith and others invokes interesting insights into the growth, composition, and distribution of the industry over a period of 100 years or so. Drawing upon time series and cross section data spanning over 100 years, the authors arrived at some substantive evidence on

economics e.g. growth, macroeconomic stabilisation, etc.

Men and money bias

Economists are generally found to speak against gender disparity both at household and national level. But the profession itself has gender bias. It is generally a more male dominated science compared to other social sciences. For example in 1998, 47-48 percent of the graduates in political science or engineering and pure sciences were females. As against this, one-third of the economics graduates were

much more inadequately served by economists than are population in rich countries."

Outputs and outlets

The economics research industry continues to produce a wide range of outputs -- ranging from specific products derived from applied research to new information and insights that flow into the decision making process of households, firms, and governments. Paul Krugman submits historical contributions of economics to our understanding of the economy and eco-

public and private decision processes have been affected to enable enhanced ability to utilise resources efficiently. "Those benefits, which can clearly be substantial, can only occur if effective economic policy practitioners are in the right place at the right time to provide the right message." Thus, it is not surprising that in both developed and developing countries, departments in public and private organisations are growingly embracing economics as a discipline to deliver their dividends from decision-making.

Economists, not priests

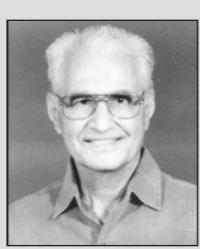
The authors observe that during 1993-1997, the proportion of economists employed in education and government had declined while the proportion employed in business and industry increased incessantly. The shifts had to do with demand and incentives. Just like other sectors of the economy, economists involved in economics and agricultural economics research industries do respond to incentives. "Moreover," in the words of Pardey and Smith, "Given that barriers to entry into the profession are not insuperable, they are no less at the mercy of Marshallian forces of supply and demand than professors of English or sanitary workforce. By the same token, however, that relatively large quantity of economists are employed at positive market prices provides at least same prima facia evidence that their output has value to someone."

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BENEATH THE SURFACE

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Inching towards -- what?



M B NAQVI

writes from Karachi

FOREIGN Ministers of Pakistan and India have made incremental progress in their two-day negotiations on September 5 and 6. It can only be assessed as inching forward. But inching toward which goal? Officially it is described as normalisation of relations. The results are a far cry from what the climate of opinion in both countries wants.

Take the main achievements: to continue the LoC ceasefire, go on talking, sorting out a few, very few, problems of marginal importance like introducing a new tourist category of visas, but sending back the eight problems to the original committees, and to agree on a few CBMs. For the rest, more routine meetings of border security, anti-narcotics officials, foreign service trainees' visits, etc are envisaged. They couldn't agree on military CBMs, including regarding nuclear weapons. More committees have been set up. There was no breakthrough on any significant issue.

There is silence over the ultimate goal, of course. Neither side felt it necessary to make new departures in settled policies: it looks as if the new Indo-Pakistan relationship has to adjust itself into the existing framework of policies. Truth is they need a rapprochement. But the quest for a true reconciliation involves going beyond merely diluting or cosmetically changing the traditional stances. The best method of reconciling is the methodology adopted by Germany and

France through their treaty of 1963. These two European countries used to be traditional enemies; they had fought three big wars in 69 years, the last one of which reduced many parts of Europe to rubble. In the 59 years since the Second World War, the two have become inseparable friends and both have achieved exemplary prosperity -- in freedom.

Why Pakistan and India cannot take this route to political prominence, economic prosperity, and cultural enrichment? The quest for normal, good neighbourliness has anyhow to cross the deep gulf of mistrust and animosity, while unchanged basic positions will continue to produce results hitherto

used its nuclear capability. War between India and Pakistan is now out of the question. And yet neither side has realised that old policies of the two are incompatible with peace. They have to go.

It might be argued that no matter how antagonistic the current policies might be, it is not impossible to pursue good neighbourliness peacefully. Well, the record of two Kashmir Wars, Rann of Kutch fracas, the 1971 War, Kargil's half war, and the near war of 2002, in addition to the war scares of 1986, 1990, and 1995, speaks for itself.

Unless Pakistan and India get out of the rut and reconcile with each other, they are fated to go on collid-

ing, suspicion, and hatred they have taken so long to build. It can be done by the cooperation of the unwashed multitude and new and more humanistic thinking. It will need chaining the beast of chauvinism by promoting a humanistic, inclusivist and pluralist thinking among all South Asian peoples. Military chauvinisms are the mother of all hate-promoting policies that result in militarisation and produce local versions of industrial-military complex.

Keep in mind that both Pakistan and India are in a quagmire: neither can actually make truly lasting peace -- in which popular welfare replaces national security as the

trust in a radical manner. People talk of CBMs as a panacea. When tension mounts between Islamabad and New Delhi, both start repositioning troops and tanks rather than to reassure the other side. No Indian general can be unmindful of Pakistani nukes nor any Pak commander forget that a Prithvi-mounted weapon is at the ready. The basic military assumption is: capability equals readiness to use it. So long as the inherent mischief of nuclear weapons is not fully taken care of, there can be no stable peace in South Asia.

People say the same thing about Kashmir dispute. It is true that it is a tough problem. But atomic weapons disbelieve either Natwar Singh or Khurshid Kasuri. But behind them are arrayed politicians (uniformed in Kasuri's case), backed by fearsome bureaucrats.

The point is that today's snail-paced progress is all that is available before it breaks down and both sides will try again after a few years. The mere fact that the FMs meetings ended on a Monday but the joint statement was issued on Wednesday shows how the respective backroom boys are haggling over what to include or exclude or on what spin to put. No substantial issue could be clinched and this is not an accident.

But still, a few things about results of Delhi encounter need notice. Khokrapar-Munabao rail and bus have still to be discussed as is Srinagar-Muzaffarabad link. Bombay and Karachi Consulate Generals are still in the womb of future. There is nothing about visa relaxation. The two negotiators, and their backroom boys, need to be told that until the common Indian or Pakistani is enabled to travel easily and visit one another's homes, nothing is achieved. This is the touchstone for judging their achievements.

PLAIN WORDS

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garnered. So long as normalisation alone is sought, it will be like chasing one's own tail; old established policies will continue to keep the two at daggers drawn -- without actually being able to fight. It needs to be realised that the directly antithetical policies -- normally on Kashmir -- need to be changed for one good and sufficient reason: presence of nuclear weapons has effectively defanged both vis-à-vis each other and frozen the dispute.

The traditional politics of Pakistan and India relentlessly pushes them into permanent confrontation. The next step has always been conflict. But as 1999 and 2002 experiences have shown, neither dared start an all-out war; neither side could. And it was not simple mutual deterrence emanating from the Bomb. The world will not put up with a war that may degenerate into a nuclear exchange; neither can live with the consequences of having

ing. While war itself is undesirable per se, in the context of nuclear weapons it is the ultimate nightmare. Plain common sense lays down that old politics and stances have got to change if war is to be avoided. But this cannot happen unless they begin reconciling on a people-to-people basis which alone can enable changing of old politics. And thus, forging such close bonds that would create new common purposes of cooperative endeavour to enrich respective people economically and culturally becomes possible. This will also open the gates for regional integration so that a new South Asia emerges.

This is not to say that it will be easy to make war impossible and create new structures of cooperative peace and all round economic prosperity -- that reaches the bottom rung of the societies. Governments alone cannot quickly or completely pull down the structures of fear,

first priority -- nor go to war. Insofar as the people are concerned, they have in recent years shown that they want more people-to-people contacts, a new politics and governments that make human security and welfare their top priority in which national security is seen as requiring only defensive measures. They would like to see Indo-Pak cooperative friendship to become a base for regional cooperation and integration. Let there be a shared and peaceful-promoting greatness of all of South Asia. It is an alluring prospect, unless you are, like children, fascinated by swash buckling militaries and their deadly toys.

Preference for peace and economic and cultural progress of all individuals need not lead to downgrading the difficulties, viz. the forces sustaining today's animosities. Jingoistic nationalisms have produced their own nemesis: nuclear weapons. These destroy

have made it insoluble by Pakistan or India. So long as the two antagonists do not resolve the nukes problem, Kashmir too will stay intractable. Add to this the influence and machinations of local versions of industrial-military complex; they are a powerful vested interest that flourish in enmity and tension. There are ideologues on both sides who denigrate and ridicule the humanists and peace lovers as starry-eyed Utopia seekers. This gentry falls back on recent history's overhang of sharpened Hindu-Muslim tensions. The purpose of the "realists" is to ensure that nothing changes.

So what is to be made of the Natwar Singh-Kasuri encounter? Good that they met. Better that they propose to go on talking at various levels. Jaw jaw is always better than bang bang. But beyond it, it is the pie in the sky (tomorrow); different committees are to sort out the difficult problems. Not that one

There was a three quarters of a promise that journalists would be allowed free entry in India while Pakistan merely mumbled, as SAFM has been demanding. The two Foreign Ministers had promised to get it through after persuading their respective Home Ministries -- which in effect means intelligence agencies. It is doubtful if the spooks would be happy; they would play all non-official travel, if they can. It needs to be repeated, with emphasis, that criterion of all progress is how easily does the common Pakistani or Indian visit the other country and how hassle-free are the formalities.

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TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

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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.

Failed leaders, not state

Both the leaderships failed to click, and deliver (since 1991). The system (democracy) could not be made to work. Incompatible with the environment prevailing in an LDC. Old style politics failed--we need something different from the agitational type of politics needed for freedom and independence. Internal post-liberation politics (building up the nation) is different; but the political leaders are not telling us what it is, and how to practise it.

There is a snafu in the priority of survival of the nation, or the party which comes first? Procrastination is prevailing for three decades, and the topic is still taboo. Shy to lead. The path is not unknown. What is wrong with the mental acceptance of changing the political culture? Age gap or culture gap? The new and upcoming future leaders are heavily indoctrinated (square, triangle, or sphere?). In some

cases, conformity is a hindrance, at the national level. The latter is like MT Everest--no competition, and no opposition. Unity of purpose, and objective. The name of the party is secondary. Why those who lead have to have a name to remember? Post-mortem while still alive? Recognition follows sacrifice. The latter (sacrifice) is an unknown voodoo in local politics. Mental space; too crowded inside.

Adaptive politics is plaguing us. We need some subtractive politics, like Zen art. Chawa-pawa is cause and effect. There is no duality in Zen. That's the prescription for the leaders (do with less). What about the followers?

Cut down frills in politics. Personalities block the arteries to the heart (both ways, incoming and outgoing). There are huge gaps between the politicians and the voters. These are not being pointed out. Politics also needs reflective analysis, rather than overdoes of subjective and hoc stop-gap arrangements. The system, the tools, the players,

the rules, and the observers need reorientation. One example of negative blockage: why disturb the present status quo? Bad politics is nice living! "The minority is always right."

In any operation in life, the going is good for a short while. Then comes the automatic stock-taking balancing exercise, independent of all players and controllers (check the US foreign policy). Play (not try, make it effortless), rather than try to win. It works always.

Time is running out, for all nations. The rate of change is accelerating (regardless of the issue). How the leaders (anywhere in the world) are adapting to change? Back-tracking history stalls the national marathon race. When stamina fails short cuts are tried. The hare and the tortoise fable: adapt to the modern modes and style.

Today the nation is stranded, thanks to the leaders, who are unashamed.

A Mahasen

Dhaka
Dhaka's road traffic

We are stupefied and shocked as to who controls Dhaka's road traffic? DMP, DCC, bus drivers, rickshaw-pullers, hawkers, vendors, pedestrians or some invisible hands?

There is complete chaos, confusion and indiscipline, no law and order in public thoroughfares.

Whenever and wherever we travel by motor vehicles or rickshaw from one place to another, from Uttara to Motijheel Commercial Area, from Dhanmondi to Gandaria, from Basabo to Wari, from Jatrabari to Lalbagh, from Naya Paltan to Sadarghat and so on and so forth, how many road crossings, road junctions and road traffic jams do we require to cover, come across or overcome? How many minutes or hours do we require to spend to reach our destination? What amount of our valuable time, energy and money we require to lose?

Have the DCC, Rajuk or any other authority ever thought about

the matter and considered ways and means to handle the ever deteriorating situation?

Indeed, they have turned some roads into VIP roads, made some costly road div