

HSC results food for thought

Pass rate rises, but failure figures are still too high

THIS year's results of Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) Examinations have some positive features. With 47.74 percent coming out successful, this is the best-case scenario in last four years and easily a neat 10 percent better than last year's showing. The results can be regarded as the index of the students' real worth across the board because cheating was virtually non-existent at the examination halls. The steps taken by the education ministry, the seven boards and the local administrations have kept the malady at bay for the second year running. This is laudable.

We congratulate the students on their success. Of course, special mention must be made of the high achievers in the GPA-5 category. There are 3,036 in that ivy league, a frog-leap from 20 in the previous year. What with the residue above pass marks obtained in the optional subject adding to the grand total and making a difference in the number of top graders, one had to do well enough in the paper to get those bonus marks anyway. It is important to note about the improved pass percentage that, were it not for the addition of fourth subject marks, it wouldn't have been possible.

Now, we come to the downside which can be euphemistically or benignly called systems loss in human resource development terms. Under the seven education boards, out of a total of 4,83,481 candidates appearing in the HSC examinations, as many as 2,52,689 failed while 2,30,792 succeeded.

Yes, the high pass rate earns a pat on our back, even calls for celebration; but imagine the plight of the failed majority and what they mean for us! They have courted personal and family disasters; the overall outcome only made the worse for the whole nation -- in terms of money, time and opportunity cost. The debacle is a stunning loss with quarter of a million failed youngsters languishing in the national backyard. This is just a year's figure; imagine the bleak cumulative total of failed generations year after year -- from the SSC and HSC examinations.

An education system that produces a failure of this magnitude has something fundamentally wrong in it. The investments are going in the wrong place, quality education and uniformity of standards are not the focal points. This is poignantly borne out by the statistic that 281 educational institutions drew a blank on the results sheet whilst an overwhelming number accounted for 5-20 percent pass figure. The rural schools are going down.

The government and communities, in that order, must take the responsibility for having done very little to correct the system. Unless the trend is reversed, we will be thrown by the wayside as the world advances.

Basila tragedy

Government needs to be proactive rather than reactive

THE assurance of the shipping minister that legal action would be taken against the brick kiln owners responsible for creating impediments to the natural flow of the river causing unmitigated sufferings to the residents of Basila would come as little comfort to them.

It seems that the government reacts only to damaging developments rather than being proactive which could prevent such a catastrophe.

The people of Basila fell victim to the wrath of the Buriganga, having been impeded on its natural course by the dyke, constructed to protect the four brick kilns, all done illegally and in an unplanned manner. Not only the dykes, the illegal dredging of the river for quarrying sands, the construction of the Basila road etc have compounded the matter even more.

We can only sympathise with the residents of Basila who were driven to such desperation as to embark on an unprecedented action of blocking the river route, thus preventing movement of riverine traffic for several days.

The brick kilns and dyke, which are absolutely illegal, had existed for sometimes now. Why, may we ask, had it escaped the notice of the relevant agency of the government? Why no cognizance had been taken so long of the possible deleterious effect of such unplanned construction on the course of the river?

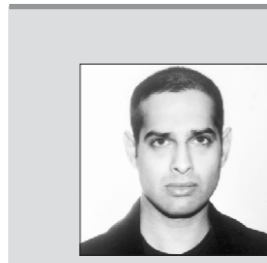
Will we be wrong in thinking that such illegal acts as constructing impediments to a major river that girdles the capital cannot have escaped the notice of those whose responsibility it is to ensure that the channels are not tampered with, that it is kept constantly navigable and that anything that causes hindrance to the natural flow of the river is immediately removed.

It is perhaps a case of public safety being subordinated to narrow self-interest on the part of the responsible officers.

We feel it is not enough to take action against the brick kiln owners only. Those that colluded in allowing an illegal act must also be taken to task.

Also, apart from taking corrective measures to prevent recurrence of another man-made erosion the government must adequately compensate the victims, whose sufferings were of others' makings and could well have been prevented.

How not to win friends and influence people



ZAFAR SOBHAN

"SOMEONE must have been spreading lies about Josef K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one morning." So begins The Trial by Franz Kafka.

Joseph K was lucky. In Bangladesh today you don't even need to have someone spreading lies about you (though that never helps) to be incarcerated. You merely need to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

One would have thought that the government would have learned its lesson about the folly of random and arbitrary arrest and detention, but I suppose that one thing that it is impossible to do is to overstate the extent of this administration's inclination for poor decisions.

This government did more or less the same thing back in April, ostensibly responding to the unwise and intemperate statement issued by the AL general secretary that the government would be ousted by the end of the month.

The problem with the government using the AL general secretary's highly irresponsible statement as a justification for the mass arrests that ensued was that, provocative as the statement was, no one really

believed for a moment that the AL actually had any kind of plan, much less the means, to oust the government.

The mass arrests of April were breathtaking in their sweep. The police cracked down hard on opposition party workers and activists and NGO workers who they claimed were plotting to unseat the government.

But even worse was that thousands of ordinary people with no connection whatsoever to politics were caught up in the police dragnet and put behind bars. By last count,

not have any extra money to pay bribes to get out of jail when they have been wrongfully imprisoned. They need to earn money on a daily basis to put food in their mouths and the mouths of their families. If they do not earn, they do not eat, and nor do their children.

This is one reason why I have always opposed hartals. For those who live from hand to mouth, day to day, to be kept from earning a living for even 24 hours can be a devastating hardship.

But this kind of random and arbitrary

and bundled off to jail, hundreds of ordinary people are also being caught and tossed behind bars.

One principal goal of the mass arrests seems to be to foil the grand rally the opposition has planned for October 3, and in this respect, a couple of points are worth noting.

The first point is that rallies and processions and human chains (such as last Wednesday's) are lawful and democratic means of expressing opposition that the government should encourage.

If the government stifles legiti-

The sweeping powers to arrest people under Section 54 without warrant and without strict evidentiary standards have long been contested for precisely this reason. It permits the government to incarcerate more or less whoever it wishes on mere suspicion unsupported by any evidence. That the government continues to abuse this power to harass the opposition is beyond question. Section 54 has no place in a civilised society, even less so when the government has demonstrated that it is incapable of

zero evidence of their involvement.

Worst of all, it is not merely its political opponents that the government is mistreating in this manner. Once again, it is ordinary people who are also bearing the brunt of the crackdown.

The question I have for the government is whether this is truly where we have come to as a country.

Is Bangladesh now a country where a common man or woman can simply be picked up for no reason and thrown behind bars with no recourse?

Is Bangladesh now a country where the rule of law is so fractured that the government itself can act in an unlawful manner with impunity and no fear of accountability?

Is Bangladesh now a country where the people have to live in perpetual fear of the authorities acting without any checks on their exercise of power -- however illegitimate?

The mass arrests are short-sighted government policy on so many levels. In the first place, they expose for all to see the government's anti-democratic tendencies and lack of respect for the rule of law.

But, more importantly, they show a contempt for the rights and well-being of the general public that will not be forgotten any time soon.

One would have thought that such considerations would be of concern to a democratically-elected government facing elections in the not too distant future.

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STRAIGHT TALK

The mass arrests are short-sighted government policy on so many levels. In the first place, they expose for all to see the government's anti-democratic tendencies and lack of respect for the rule of law. But, more importantly, they show a contempt for the rights and well-being of the general public that will not be forgotten any time soon.

over 10,000 people were incarcerated as part of the April mass arrest programme.

These included rickshaw-pullers and day labourers and anyone unfortunate enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The arrests were a bonanza for the police who extorted money from those they picked up and from their families for their release.

Eventually most were released, but with no admission of wrong-doing on the part of the administration, and certainly no compensation for their wrongful incarceration and suffering behind bars.

Millions of people live on the edge of poverty in Bangladesh. They do

trary arrest and incarceration is much worse.

Now the government is doing it again. This time it cannot even use the excuse of a plot to oust the government, and so it is reduced to stating that the latest round of over 3,000 arrests is nothing more than a common or garden anti-crime drive.

But this demonstrates nothing more clearly than the government's evident contempt for the intelligence of the general public and the belief that it can say anything -- however laughable -- without fear of being held accountable.

Of course, once again, in addition to the opposition party workers and activists who are being rounded up

mate means of expressing dissent, then what does it expect the opposition to do? The government knows full well that the opposition will use such suppression as an excuse for less democratic and desirable means of protest such as hartals, or worse.

If democratic means of dissent are stamped out, then this encourages those who say that non-democratic and even violent means of opposing the government are the only solution. No responsible person wants that.

The second point is that these kinds of mass arrests simply have no place in a democratic country governed by the rule of law.

using it responsibly.

But Section 54 is not the only tool the government has been using. Many people have been arrested under Section 86 of the DMP Ordinance -- a provision whose validity has been called into question by the High Court, and which only remains on the books due to the government's failure to respond to the HC in a timely manner, which has left the matter unsettled as yet.

And many of the thousands arrested in this latest mass arrest have simply been thrown behind bars without any due process, or have been falsely charged with crimes with which they have zero connection and for which there is

The UN at crossroads

Issues at the current session of General Assembly



HARUN UR RASHID

THE 59th session of the UN General Assembly opened on 14th September under the Presidency of Gabon. The Assembly is meeting with questions hovering the minds of delegates from 191-member countries about the world body's role and relevance in the 21st century in the shadow of President Bush's comment that the UN would simply fade away into history as an "ineffective, irrelevant, debating society" when the UN refused to back the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

It is reported that at least 89 heads of state/government will address the Assembly meeting over the next few weeks. President Bush addressed the Assembly on 21 September and in a 180-degree turnaround he now wanted the UN to help Iraq. His message received a cool reception among the delegates and the French President reportedly left the UN building before he began his address.

India's Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh spoke on 23 September, so did Bangladesh Foreign Minister Morshed Khan. Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia could not attend the meeting because of pressing domestic matters.

Major issues before the Assembly

The Assembly has been in session in the backdrop of armed conflicts in many countries, such as in Iraq, Afghanistan and Sudan. It is not far to seek the reasons why the UN has not been able to put its "green helmet" troops in the war zones, where tens of thousands are being killed. It is the causes of the failure of the UN in war zones that confront the delegates as one of the critical issues at this current session.

Among the highlights of this 59th Assembly, the issues that are expected to dominate are:

- (i) Eminent persons' panel report on the re-organisation of the UN;
- (ii) Expansion of the Security Council and the likely contenders;
- (iii) Secretary General's power;
- (iv) What constitutes terrorism;
- (v) Millennium development goals;
- (vi) Peace-keeping missions;
- (vii) Financial stability of the UN and
- (viii) Reforms of the UN Secretariat.

Let us briefly examine one by one the above issues:

of the Council with "veto" powers. Japan and Germany were left out.

At present after the US, Japan is the largest economy in the world and Germany is the largest economy in Europe. Although they pay more money into the UN coffers than any other nation except the US, they are not permanent members of the Security Council. There is a general consensus that the old order must be updated to reflect the present power structure of the 21st century.

The next controversial question comes as to "who" and "which geo-

graphy area" the members will come from. With regard to Japan and Germany, there seems to be a general consensus that they should sit as permanent members of the Council but not with veto powers. The difficult area is the selection of countries from developing countries because regional politics coupled with animosities.

The leading contenders from developing countries include Brazil, India, Egypt, Indonesia, South Africa and Nigeria. If India becomes a member, Pakistan would like to get in together with India. It is reported that Kenya, Argentina, and Mexico, are likely to present themselves as candidates for the Security Council.

Already Brazil, Germany, Japan and India have launched a joint bid at the current session for permanent seats on the Council. The four states pledged to back each other's case and said similar status should be given to an African nation. The joint statement implies that they support only five states to become new permanent members of the Council, making it from 15 to 20-member Council. Analysts believe the joint bid is likely to meet opposition from other rival regional countries.

Many perceive that the incumbent Secretary General is too weak to stand up before the big powers, in particular to the US (lately he has become critical of US's Iraq policy). Some say that he got the position with the strong backing from the US, otherwise it was unheard of that a career UN officer was elected the Secretary General of the UN. He has been found wanting in vision and leadership in Iraq war and on the issue of hurried dispatch of UN officials in Baghdad in a very insecure situation. The UN representative Sergio Vieira De Mello had to pay the ultimate price

of his death.

It has been estimated that US\$50 billion per year (each year the world spends US\$50 billion on aid and US\$950 billion on armed forces) are required to halve global hunger and poverty by 2015. On 20th September, Brazil has spearheaded at the UN convening a summit against hunger and poverty. The proposal for "Global Fund for Hunger" had the support of over 100 countries. A final declaration was issued that was signed by 113 countries but the US refused to sign.

Peace-keeping missions of the UN have become successful and at present more than 44,000 UN troops are stationed in various countries to oversee peace among the warring nations. However, the UN Charter is silent on the peace-keeping function of the UN. One can say that it falls between the Chapter VI (Pacific Settlement of Disputes) and Chapter VII (Action with respect to breaches of peace). There is a need that the Charter specifically incorporates this important function of the UN in a volatile world.

Another pressing issue is the financial situation of the UN. It has been running in deficit for a number of years because the UN depends too heavily on a few numbers of States. To

address the long-standing issue, there is a suggestion that change the scale of assessment of contribution of member states needs to be seriously looked at. (Other suggestions to boost financial situation of the UN include (a) commercial borrowing, (b) a levy on arms sales by countries listed in the UN Register of Arms Sales, (c) a levy on international air tickets, and (d) tax exemptions for private contributions to the UN (Bill Gates and other billionaires may donate money to the UN and receive tax benefits from the US).)

There is a view that the UN Secretariat needs drastic reforms. It is now top-heavy and needs to be lean and efficient. Too many senior officers at the level of Under and Assistant Secretaries General are located in New York, without extensive field experience. There is a suggestion that the Secretariat should be divided into four categories: (a) peace and security, (b) economic and social, (c) humanitarian and (d) administrative and management. The heads of the divisions must be responsible and accountable for their performance in the particular area. An independent body should examine their performance and report back to the General Assembly.

Conclusion

As the UN is approaching its 60th anniversary next year, it is imperative that member-states should think seriously how to respond to the challenges of the 21st century. The UN was created to fulfil the aspiration of humankind -- rich and poor -- and the fact that the preamble of the Charter states "We, the peoples of the United Nations" are determined to save "the succeeding generations from the scourge of war", demonstrates clearly that people want peace, stability and harmony in the world.

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Musharraf's 'uniform' issue sparks off new debate



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

THE issue centring the "uniform" of Pakistan's president General Pervez Musharraf is taking a new turn after the strongman appears reneging on his earlier promise that he would relinquish the position of the chief of the army by the end of 2004. This issue has introduced a new element in the otherwise not so exiting political scenario of the country and it seems that the debate centring the "uniform" of the president will create sufficient ripples in the country in the days ahead.

Gen. Musharraf, who seized power in a bloodless coup in October, 1999, has so far remained at the helm of the

country without much problems and mostly he has been able to make his scheme of things work in a nation where representative governments mostly took a back seat because of military or quasi-military rule. Two main political figures of the country -- Benazir Bhutto of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Mian Nawaz Sharif of the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) -- both former prime ministers -- are in exile abroad. Though their political organisations are trying to keep the anti-government pot boiling but without causing much dent in the rule of Musharraf. The parliamentary elections that took place within three years of Musharraf's seizure of power under a verdict of the supreme court brought a semblance of democracy in the country while the real power is wielded by the president, who remains the chief of the army.

Pro-Musharraf politicians won the parliamentary elections and formed the government but the president, seeking to assuage the feelings of different groups, promised six Islamic parties that he would shed uniform by 2004. In turn, they promised to support the president until 2007. But Gen. Musharraf now seems reneging back on the pledge indicating a new scheme of things although it is not clear what is exactly in his mind. He

MATTERS AROUND US

If Gen. Musharraf finally chooses to remain in uniform reneging on his promise, this may be seen as "imperative necessity" by him and his supporters "for the sake of nation" but this would certainly be a setback to Pakistan's return to democracy.

told newsmen at the United Nations on the sidelines of the general assembly session that he is somewhat "confused" on the issue of giving up uniform. True, the president has not spelled out unambiguously that would quit his army position, but indications are abundantly clear that there is little likelihood that he would stick to his earlier promise on the uniform issue.

The first broad hint that the president may go back on his promise came from new prime minister Shaukat Aziz, who cited a resolution by the Punjab assembly requesting General Musharraf to retain his army position for the sake of the nation and the people. This observation caused some uproar in the six Islamic parties which had demanded and finally extracted this promise from the president while two main opposition parties, the PPP and the PML (Nawaz)

came down further heavily on the military ruler, saying he was prolonging his undemocratic rule on this or that pretext. These two parties are opposing Musharraf's rule tooth and nail from the beginning, but have not succeeded in creating much rupture there.

Nawaz Sharif, now in exile in Saudi Arabia, has all the reasons to be very vehement since it was his elected government that was toppled by Musharraf as the army chief. Nawaz was interned on various charges and convicted, but later sent into exile in a deal mediated by the Saudi government and probably the United States had also a role. Benazir Bhutto chose to live abroad as she fears that prison will welcome her on return home on a variety of allegations particularly corruption. Her husband Asif Zardari, who was very powerful as the spouse

of premier Benazir, is still in jail. Both Benazir and Nawaz's parties bitterly criticised Musharraf's latest position on the "uniform" and said this would take Pakistan further away from democracy.

Arguably, Musharraf received broad support from people when he seized power because the elected governments -- both headed by Benazir and Nawaz -- failed to deliver the goods and people's disliking particularly soared because of alleged corruption and nepotism. Few shed tears for Nawaz when he was removed despite the fact that he was an elected government and people of Pakistan prefer democracy. Musharraf took the advantage of "misrule" by popular politicians and he successfully laid a base for himself in the power structure by providing a relatively better administration and

handling manifold problems for the country like the difficult Afghan situation. Admittedly, he has given an impression that Pakistan needs a dynamic leadership at this stage and many are convinced by this contention.

But undemocratic rule cannot continue for long in these days when main countries in the region are democratic and even the hitherto undemocratic nations in the nearby south-east Asian region are also embracing representative governments. Besides, replacement of democracy by undemocratic authority cannot be justified howsoever bad is the performance of an elected government since it is the people who should take a decision on the change of government. Musharraf gave parliamentary polls but the government thus formed headed by the elected prime

minister is not calling the shots since the power remains with the president. This is crystal clear by the fact that Zafarullah Khan Jamali had to go when the president was not satisfied with him and an apparently more loyal Shaukat Aziz is the new prime minister. No doubt, the new person is known as an able person and under him as the finance minister Pakistan also achieved considerable economic progress. But he remains at his position at the sweet will of the president who, however, is not an elected person. This cannot be claimed a democratic principle regardless of how much the nation needs Musharraf at this stage.

It is true that major political parties in Pakistan are cutting a sorry figure in mounting stiff resistance against Musharraf's rule mainly for two reasons -- their own record when they were in power and a better economic and internationally conducive situation for Pakistan under Musharraf. He has survived two attempts on his life. His coming down on some militant religious organisations on one hand and being able to keep the two principal politicians at arms length as well as the global and regional conditions may be factors behind these attempts. But Musharraf's claim that glass of democracy in Pakistan "99 percent full" with developments, human rights

improvement etc, is tinged with hollowiness. Because a genuine democracy can not be characterised by the person at the helm remaining in uniform.

Evidently, the Pakistan president considers the army as the basis of his power and clearly he is unwilling to relinquish this position. This runs contrary to the ethics of popular government. If Gen. Musharraf finally chooses to remain in uniform reneging on his promise, this may be seen as "imperative necessity" by him and his supporters "for the sake of nation" but this would certainly be a setback to Pakistan's return to democracy. This may also embarrass the western countries particularly the United States, which found in him a staunch ally in the anti-terror campaign, but a stress factor in full return of democracy. Democracy cannot be compromised or other gains no matter how strategic or advantageous they are and Pakistan needs unalloyed representative pattern of government even if one is inclined to accept that Musharraf's tenure has given Pakistan achievements in different fields.

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