

Tension along the border

Bilateral agreement must be honoured

WE cannot but be concerned at the recent incidents along the Indo-Bangladesh border. The situation stems from attempts by the Indian BSF to build fences along the border that is in gross violation of the Indo-Bangladesh Boundary Agreements of 1974, and also from attempts to push in Bangla speaking Indians, again a patently illegal act.

The tension along a number of points of the Indo-Bangla border has been serious enough to necessitate declaration of red alert by the BDR and reportedly the BSF has arrayed several thousand troops following exchange of fire. Regrettably it has caused displacement of several thousand local Bangladeshis who were forced to flee their hearths and homes for fear of their lives, in Lalmonirhat sector.

The boundary accord between our two countries prohibits construction of any kind within 150 yards of the no man's land. Yet we see the Indian BSF, resorting to the construction of fences within the no man's land time and again.

There are appropriate mechanisms open to both the countries to address such situations along the border. We regret to note that the Indian response has been less than helpful. We find the Indian refusal to sit for talks at the local levels to diffuse the tension at the first instance against the spirit of good neighbourly relations.

There are also agreed specifics that guide the handling of illegals in each other's country, and forcibly pushing suspected illegal migrants across the border is certainly not one of them.

The matter of fencing is a policy issue which one would have thought couldn't have been undertaken without the green signal from the top, and so it is with the 'push-in bids'. We are at a loss to understand how the Indian authority can allow such acts.

In spite of the understanding that was reached at the home secretary level meeting of the two countries last year in Dhaka that all possible steps shall be taken to prevent untoward incidents at the borders, such incidents have occurred from time to time. We would hope that the upcoming senior officers' level meetings of the BDR and the BSF would iron out the issues, and that such incidents would not be repeated in future.

Perennial power shortage

No more words, action needed

LOAD-shedding is here again. And this time, the situation is looking even grimmer. We get frustrated, angry at frequent power cuts as soon as the summer arrives. No sign of respite from this terrible seasonal ordeal can be seen. Government after government have assured us of improvement in the power sector, but nothing concrete has happened so far.

The BNP-led government on assumption of power in 2001 had blamed the former AL government for its failure to add any extra megawatt to the national grid. But we want to ask the present government, what have they done to turn the situation around, after more than three years in power? What has gone wrong with a government having had a strong two-thirds majority mandate that it could not fulfil a simple pledge for steadying the supply of electricity all the year round.

As it is, our consumption of electricity is among the lowest in the world. We are hard put to meet the current demand of power computed at a lower threshold, but if we are to visualise the projected requirement keeping in view the millenium goal for halving poverty by 2015, the frustration becomes overwhelming.

Energy is a fundamental infrastructure that cannot be trifled with except to the peril of our national development efforts. We never tire of bragging about the investment climate in the country and the incentives offered by us to attract FDIs. Not so long ago, the World Bank had cited, not corruption and other hurdles but erratic power supply as the chief obstacle to investment in Bangladesh. We do not want explanations for the current situation, we are interested in results only.

FARID BAKHT

THE World Bank is funding the drive to remove rickshaws off main thoroughfares of Dhaka. However, they seem to be having second thoughts over how this is being handled.

A major part of the project involves getting rid of Non-Motorised Transport. Shrewdly, they are doing this road by road, and not in one big bang. These so-called VIP roads have been termed "corridors." Already, two roads or corridors have been "freed" from rickshaws. Corridor 1 runs from Gabtoli (northwest) to Russell Square. Corridor 2 runs from Russell Square to Azimpur-Newmarket.

Things are not going smoothly. Commuters are writing to newspapers about how the so-called "rickshaw jams" have been transferred from the main road to the smaller residential streets. They are recognising that such grand measures (similar to constructing a flyover) do not automatically solve the traffic problem. It just moves the problem on to somewhere else.

Is this the way to reduce poverty?

The World Bank champions the cause of self-employment. Recently a UN representative came to see how we are progressing on The

Millennium Development Goals (MDG). These target a reduction in poverty by half by 2015. The over-hasty move to remove rickshaws seems to fly against these objectives, since there is considerable doubt whether compensation and "rehabilitation" packages will work. In fact, the World Bank had to recently make a public statement that there would be no further progress on this project until Corridor 2 affected rickshaw people are properly rehabilitated. In other words, no more money until things are done properly. That threat must be concentrating some minds.

The Bank seems to be calling for a review for the second corridor but what about the first corridor? Why should those thousands be forgotten? They should initiate a detailed study, report of findings and a clear statement of whether the process of compensation and alternative livelihoods is being successful. This should involve a real dialogue with the pullers and owners, not some stage-managed "consultation with stakeholders."

Irreplaceable money?

The massive economic impact of inwards remittances from rickshaw pullers to their families in the villages seems to have been overlooked or underestimated. Unofficial estimates range from \$150M to

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

WE may have to admit that the Bangladesh polity as of now is experiencing fearsome desperation and mind-boggling despondency with very little hope of welcome deliverance.

Admittedly, the educated class suffers from cynicism and apathy. They do not dispel the gloom and are sadly losing faith in the future of the country. The country expects the intelligentsia to adopt a clear-cut stand on issues of national importance and to fight for them. The educated are expected to face all odds with equanimity and not to compromise. The most remarkable fact of political life in Bangladesh is the absence of public response to the gradual collapse of order in the society. The pathetic acceptance of the many indignities and excesses inflicted upon citizens by arrogant power-wielders is a blight for which the entire intelligentsia -- lawyers, journalists, educationists professionals, and all thinking people bear responsibility. They think a 'messiah' will fix all the troubles and forget that their feudal mindset is the root cause of many problems.

Our state structures have been autocratic, exploitative and repressive but we have failed to exert enough pressure for reforms and restructuring. Religious fanaticism, bigotry and militancy are on the increase and while the writ of the government may not run in some areas, our institutions are still strong, the present chaos and all the efforts to create an institutional vacuum notwithstanding. However, the almost vulgar life-style of the new rich and the stark disparities in income distribution are causes for concern. So when our middle classes talk about a revolution, they perhaps wish the emergence of a strong, competent, upright and ruthless leader who will purge the society of all corruption and punish the entire ruling class which has 'looted and plundered' the

resources of the country without any compensation. But the big question is: from where will we bring such a leader? Nobody knows the answer.

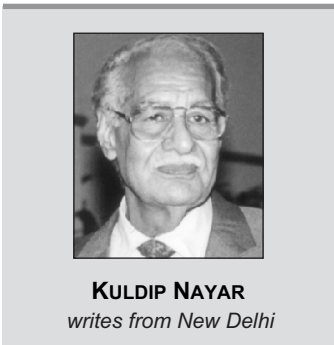
The ominous desperation

Lack of proper action at the appropriate time and mismanagement in the socioeconomic sphere have led us to a desperate situation where we have been compelled to extol the virtues of action whose legality is subject to question. The reference is to the activities of RAB (Rapid Action Battalion) with regard to deaths of suspects and accused persons in custody. The elite outfit has been created through legal

utility bills of service bodies and licence fees of corporate body. In such an eventuality it would appear that ad hocism will reign supreme and that the public service is incapable of any long-term planning. In this scenario, as one goes down to district and local level one may find that the government hardly exists.

The desperation in the law enforcement can be countered in several ways. One such way is major reforms in police force. Control has to be established over its activities. It must not be used by government to harass and victimise its opponents. Recruitments, transfers and positing must not be done

Code of democracy



KULDIP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

BENAZIR Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, former Prime Ministers of Pakistan, have reportedly agreed to devise a "code of democracy" for their country when they met at L. Jeddah recently. The two would appoint working groups to draft it. This is odd because democracy itself is a code. Certain assumptions guide it. The understanding is that people and political parties will confine themselves to the environs of freedom and liberty.

India's experience is that democracy works, not the code. Crime, corruption, and callousness may make the country look anarchical. But institutions invariably rise to the occasion. The strength is the sturdiness of the constitution, law courts, the Election Commission, and such other institutions. They function so fiercely independent that the will of the people comes to prevail.

The craze for power by parties and the one-point programme to retain it by hook or by crook have told upon the institutions in India over the years. Even the governance has come to be tainted. Still

when the chips are down the democratic values have been found asserting themselves. Public and press opinion have chipped in.

That examples like Goa take place is unfortunate. The Congress cut a sorry figure in the state where the governor, a former Congress chief minister of Nagaland, dismissed the elected government of the BJP. No doubt, it was an unstable government with a majority of two members. But the governor went to the extent of not only sack-

ing the BJP chief minister but installing one from the Congress who has all the time to prove his majority when he likes.

This was a murder of democracy. However, the wave of shock that has spread throughout the country has made the Congress look sheepish. It may not have admitted its mistake. But it is trying its best to meet the criticism as far as possible. So long as institutions are healthy, things can be retrieved. A judicial review by the Supreme Court, which it introduced on its own some 10, 12 years ago, has lessened the governor's whimsical interference in states.

again, the Congress president was asked to nominate the leader. This meant that the members fell in line with the choice of the high command, not their own. This was unfortunate but it related to internal democracy which, in any case, was absent not only in the Congress but other political parties as well.

This very high command made a mess in Bihar when it supported the two rivals -- Laloo Prasad Yadav and Ram Vilas Paswan -- at the same time during elections. In this way, the Congress divided the Muslim vote. Otherwise, it was not possible for the BJP to have the best showing in eastern Bihar where the Muslims

dominated. In truth, the Congress wanted to cut Laloo and Paswan down to size and it expected to recreate a base of its own in the state but in the process, it frittered away the advantage the secular forces had. The party itself also suffered and won some 10 out of 243 seats.

My worry is that if the Congress does not realise its folly, it may commit the same mistake in UP where the Congress has lost its base. The BJP, far from recovered

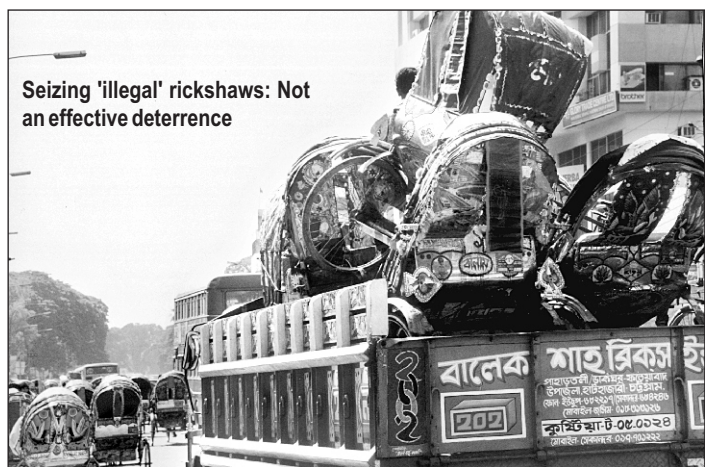
from the blows it received during the Lok Sabha elections, got a negative advantage in Bihar. It would be worse in UP if secular forces did not unite and when the state poll took place. The Congress' inscrutable moves can help the BJP recover. The larger question that secular forces must face is how to fight against communal elements unitedly and concertedly. But this consideration, as the recent polls show, has been pushed into background. However, secularism should not be used to cover up crime or corruption. That Laloo has done little for the state in terms of development is

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We should learn from past operations. For example, most citizens supported the introduction of CNG auto-rickshaws because they replaced the polluting 2-stroke "baby taxis." They might be less

supportive of how many auto-rickshaw drivers and owners have allegedly not been properly compensated and been thrown on the scrap heap. Numerous stories have come out in the media. We are in danger of repeating this on a much larger scale.

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socio-economic field. The need is for a professional team with requisite powers to ensure economic management on the basis of best available research. The institutional crisis of state authority has to be resolved effectively. We have to realise that the real threat to our polity lies in our deeply troubled economy, the prevailing system of governance and the poor indices in the social sectors, especially in the education system. We have to make intelligent choices. We must examine how the dependency syndrome has resulted in the bypassing of the people's potential of paying the capital cost of development pro-

jects, particularly in the social sectors and also the user's charges. We also have to take very strong actions to control corruption following the easy money that flies in with foreign assistance.

We may put the entire blame for most of our problems on politicians and government servants. However, the civil society has not set high standards of morality, simplicity and hard work. It has to be remembered that without checks and balances most governments tend to be corrupt and unresponsive. There is still a lot of apathy and indifference towards addressing the problems of civil society and it is only recently that we see some awareness of these issues.

Bangladesh's single most important crisis is a moral one. Our privileged class as well as the middle classes have developed highly acquisitive instincts. They are virtually greedy to the core. Apparently religious, many of them hardly

nothing new. Nor are his corrupt ways. Still the Congress that has accommodated him as the Railway Minister at the Centre should have handled him differently. Instead of allowing him to allot the number of seats to his allies, the Congress and the Left should have asserted themselves to get a better deal. At least they should have put their foot down on the candidature of criminals. He could not have gone it alone.

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ever practice the frugality, simplicity and integrity enjoined by religion. The idealists have vanished from our society and politics has turned into a game of power, pelf and privilege. We need committed and selfless people who are ready to take up causes. We need physicians who are willing to see what is happening outside their clinics, teachers who take classes in right earnest, writers and journalists who are not desirous of instant recognition, lawyers who are not oblivious of the litigant's misery and brilliant engineers and architects who are conscious of the deteriorating condition of the megapolis.

No society can make progress without idealists and dreamers. In desperation, we have started looking for people for whom money is not everything. We have reached a stage where without a fundamental change in the nature of political power, mode of governance and the very basis and direction of the state itself our socio-economic crisis can not be overcome. We need institutional decision making which can respond to objective economic logic and accept the urgency for reactivity and innovation. For that the establishment has to take bold decisions. In order to do that we do not need heroes any more nor do we need charismatic leaders.

Bangladeshis are a very patient people. They do not have high aspirations nor do they make heavy demands on their leaders. They want only reasonably honest and down-to-earth leadership. They do not even demand high moral standards from their leaders. They are broad-minded enough to put up with their leaders' idiosyncrasies and weaknesses, provided they deliver. The need of the hour is a management system and a team of good managers in every walk of life.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is former Inspector General of Police and Secretary to the government.

announcement before election. His intimation to the state governor not to support the RJD complicated things unnecessarily.

Former Home Minister Buta Singh, the Bihar governor, again the Congress nominee, did not have much of an option because Paswan held the key. His 30 members could give a majority either to the Laloo-Congress combination or to the BJP-led alliance. However, the governor's role in Jharkhand is reprehensible. He should have invited the BJP-led alliance which was the largest group even though three or four members short of majority. But inviting the other combination that includes the Congress was patently wrong. Such situations, as the Supreme Court judgments have said, have to be sorted out on the floor of the house. Obviously, the governor wanted to placate the Congress-led Centre.

India has to come out with some solution to ensure that governor's discretion is not according to the telephone calls from New Delhi. Such instances of bias have come to notice in the last few years. Goa is only the recent example. The code of democracy may not be necessary but it is essential that governors follow certain norms. The Sarkaria Commission on Centre-State relations has listed some. But no government at New Delhi has implemented them. Governors continue to take the cue from the Centre, whichever government in power. The nation should not expect anything better if politicians continued to be appointed as governors.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

The World Bank takes a breather over Dhaka's rickshaws

The Bank has finally made the right move in calling for proper handling of compensation for affected rickshaws. It now needs to go the whole way by ensuring there is a watertight and fair procedure before embarking on a politically sensitive mission that could lose a whole lot of votes. They have miscalculated before. Neither they, nor the government, can afford to get this one wrong.

\$200M per year. That translates to nearly Tk. 1,000 crore. They provide a lifeline to poor rural families who have no other means of income generation. Approximately 70 percent of rickshaw pullers come from 20 districts where there is river erosion, i.e. environmentally-degraded districts where for many there may be literally no going back.

These people have searched for employment within these districts and found nothing available. We must ignore urban prejudices that they have not done so. Virtually no rickshaw puller wants to be in this inhuman profession. They would much rather be working in the agriculture or service sector near their families and village, rather than struggle in this polluted city.

So the question is: does this project generate the equivalent millions so that the poorest of families in the poorest of districts do not go down?

Directly? I very much doubt it.

Not good before an election

Given the next general election campaign will start in the next few months, the move to close down a significant part of the rickshaw industry, affecting hundreds of thousands of people across the country, has got to be a sure vote loser. It will not help candidates when they have to explain why the authorities have thrown people out a job. For authorities, read "present government." It is an easily exploitable issue and this sector has a natural sympathy with many voters.

From a purely electoral perspective, it would be prudent to get the message across that the authorities recognise that is not just a transport issue and that it is a social and economic issue. That the authorities are listening to both affected passengers and also the pullers and ensuring a smooth transition for the latter.

There has to be an exit away from this type of inhuman industry. There

is consensus on that. Where we differ is where the process is being handled callously and the short time frame in which it is being conducted.

We should learn from past operations. For example, most citizens supported the introduction of CNG auto-rickshaws because they replaced the polluting 2-stroke "baby taxis." They might be less

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Compensation/Rehabilitation Package

Emergency Asset Transfer of Tk. 5,000 for mainly older pullers. This is equivalent to six weeks' wages. Then what? In any case, hardly any puller will be eligible.

Micro-credit loans of up to Tk. 10,000. A consultancy group has estimated that less than a third of pullers will meet the eligible criteria. This is the equivalent of less than 3 months' wages. What return can one expect from Tk. 10,000?

The third element of the package is worth about Tk. 8,500 each for skill development and for job placement. Hardly any fit the criteria.

So, two-thirds are not going to get much in the way of money.

The World Bank should be wondering whether:

(a) Their packages are really good enough or even fair;

(b) The packages will be properly distributed;

(c) How effective the training will be;

(d) The net economic costs to the rural districts and how to replace that money; and

(e) Whether khas (government) land could be redistributed to affected pullers. At least they are an asset and worth something.

Bad for PR

They might also like to think what

this does to their image if people living below the poverty line are not allowed an honest attempt to earn a living. The public relations unit (if there is one) of this institution has already scored an own goal with its attempt to gain immunity from the Bangladesh government. Before that, it pledged mostly old money for flood rehabilitation after the 2004 deluge. Santa Claus turned into Scrooge. They got away with that one because we have learnt to be quiet or look elsewhere. Civil society was more excited about the war of words over immunity. They were less interested in getting funds for reconstruction for our 20 million victims. Notice the generosity of donors for South East Asian Tsunami victims by contrast.

So far, as regards rickshaws, the Bank has finally made the right move in calling for proper handling of compensation for affected rickshaws. It now needs to go the whole way by ensuring there is a watertight and fair procedure before embarking on a politically sensitive mission that could lose a whole lot of votes. They have miscalculated before. Neither they, nor the government, can afford to get this one wrong.

Farid Bakht is a member of the Futurebanga Network and can be reached on faridbakht@yahoo.com.