

Primary education on a tangent

Programmes for the disadvantaged needed

THE prevailing state of primary education at the grassroots presents a rather grim picture. A survey called Education Watch 2003-04, carried out by Campaign for Popular Education (Campe) reveals that one out of five children can not enroll for primary-level schooling while one in every three enrolled drops out before completing the course. That's not all, one in every three remains 'non-literate' or 'semi-literate' even after completing five years of schooling. The implications are serious for the rate of literacy in the country.

The access to primary education is one aspect of the problem, the other important point at issue is the asymmetry in the quality of education being imparted. Why are the vast majority of children deprived of primary education, and those that are enrolled being denied of good quality education? The survey has cited many reasons for the limited accessibility and poor quality assurance -- administrative mismanagement, inadequate infrastructure, lack of quality teachers, to name the obvious problems. But the major cause for deprivation is none other than poverty plaguing the teeming millions. Large number of children do not go to school, because they are forced to accept some form of employment to support their families. To their parents, education is the last option for their wards. Even the stipends that are supposed to be distributed to the needy, disadvantaged children tend to fall in the hands of unscrupulous group of officials.

Many a time in the past, demands for recruiting able and qualified teachers were made, but these went largely unheeded resulting in the decline of educational quality across the board. Therefore, no matter how firmly the authorities try to emphasise that there has been commendable progress in primary level education unless the inherent anomalies are removed, survey results will continue to provide a gloomy picture.

We agree with the survey group (Campe) that inequality and deprivation in primary education must be recognised as a serious issue in dire need for resolution. Indeed, allocation for education programmes must be based on equity and weighted in favour of the disadvantaged in the society.

Saifur's tirade

The all knowing minister finds journalists to be illiterate

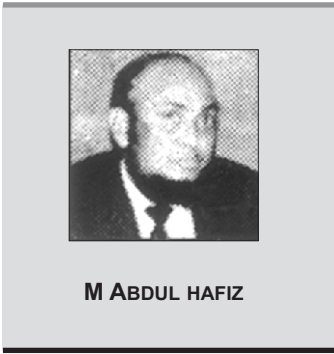
THE finance minister is again at his favourite pastime - bashing the media. Even the most strident of his followers will not accuse him of being friendly to the media but this time he may have just crossed the limits with his vitriolic remarks against the press. He has accused the journalists of indulging in mischief by fabricating news, of being a bunch of ignoramuses good for nothing, whose recourse to the profession is as a last resort, being unfit for any other job. While we cannot but take umbrage to his insensible comments we suggest that such attributes are not necessarily the 'exclusive preserve' of any profession, not excluding the accountants' calling.

The finance minister has also chosen to accuse the media of manufacturing news to destroy the image of the country, something we find hard to comprehend. Nothing can be farther from the truth. It is indeed a travesty to suggest that the media is in any way less patriotic than others.

There seems to be a wrong perception of 'image' of the country that the finance minister seems to wear on his sleeves. We believe strongly that 'image' is more than a matter of keeping prices down or paying our farmers their due price. It is built on good governance, transparency in government dealings, and the rule of law, fulfilling commitments and not demonstrating ostrich like attitude, which the government has often done, when it comes to facing unpalatable facts. The image of the country rests on the deeds and misdeeds of the government itself. When the press calls a spade a spade and exposes the hard truth, why must a minister vilify the messenger for the unpalatable message rather than weighing in for corrective measures?

Regrettably, failing to counter the press reports on rational and factual basis such vituperative remarks are resorted to. We consider such comments an attempt to cramp the free press and fetter the discharge of its rightful duty, which is to uphold the people's right to know the truth.

Syria : In the line of fire



HENRY Kissinger had once famously remarked that there couldn't be a war in the Middle East without Egypt and no peace without Syria. When in the wake of Oslo process -- and Madrid Peace Conference before that -- Israel's Arab neighbours fell in line with the US-Israeli designs one after another, Syria stood defiant to the fake peace process initiated and brokered by Israel's western patrons led by the United States. It was obviously a disappointment for a sullen superpower intoxicated with unparalleled power as well as a roadblock to her scheme to turn Israel into a regional hegemony and fulfil the latter's dream of achieving a 'greater Israel' stretching from the Nile to the Euphrates. Eversince Washington's neo conservatives wanted to enact

their favourite gambit -- a regime change in Syria -- to find a compliant leader before they put in their game plan in one of the endgames in redrawing the region's politico strategic map. The late president Assad during his 30 years' rule refused to submit to the west's threats and demands and insisted on a complete Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights before any peace

could be agreed upon. His son Bashar is equally a hard nut.

A Syrian exile Farid Gadhri (like Iraq's Chalabi) already came handy for a regime change. Gadhri has since been lobbying for the pending 'Syria Liberation Act' which would involve the Bush Administration to commit to undertake regime change in Damascus. A neo conservative lobby group -- Committee on the Present Danger (CPD) established in August,

2004 -- invited Gadhri to a symposium in collaboration with the Foundation for Defence of Democracies (FDD) created two days after 9/11 and whose views reflect those of die hard pro-Israel activists like Richard Pearle, former CIA director James Woolsey and former US ambassador to UN Jean Kirk Patrick.

Now Mr Rafik Hariri's killing in

tion leaves one in no doubt that he regards it as an opportunity for him to act as a judge, jury and an executioner. More so when Syria has 15,000 of her troops stationed in Lebanon. Although the troops were dispatched there at the request of then Lebanese President the nationalist elements of the country resent their presence in Lebanon.

Syria is suddenly in the dock

has since been gathering momentum. The analysts associated with the FDD and other rightwing thinktanks are painting a scary scenario of Syria's potential for mischief and are openly urging the administration to take military action against Syria for its alleged "material support to terrorist groups killing American soldiers in Iraq". "Syria is a hostile regime. We had sweet talk

The ominous developments obtaining with regard to Syria clearly suggest that neocons have Syria as their immediate target. Renowned rightist columnist and a former presidential candidate against Ronald Reagon, Pat Buchanan has exposed the true agenda of the neocons: "To neocons the war was never about WMDs or alleged Iraqi ties to 9/11. The real reason was empire and making the Middle East safe for Israel. The neocons' agenda means escalation; enlarging the Army, more troops in Iraq, widening the war to Syria and Iran and indefinite occupation of Middle East, as we forcibly change the mindset of the Islamic world to embrace democracy and Israel".

Bush's reelection is regarded by the cabal surrounding him as an endorsement of their policy of truculent unilateralism and in the right of Israel to their Biblical boundaries which they are keen to redraw. In the meantime they give damn to the fact "that never in history" -- according to Schlesinger, Kennedy's national security adviser -- "has the republic been so unpopular abroad, so mistrusted, feared, even hated."

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

One and a half cheers for Rab

ABU ABDULLAH

THE Rapid Action Battalion seems to be a rare model of super-efficiency. They get their man, and only their man -- one never hears of an innocent passer-by being shot, or of a regrettable episode involving mistaken identity And they themselves appear to be invulnerable -- not, as far I recall, a single death on their side.

Their main target -- almost the only target -- are the self-styled "left" political parties, for the most part robber bands pure and simple or miscellaneous urban terrorists who had made people's lives a nightmare. They seem to be still (touch wood) basically non-partisan. So, three cheers for the Rab then?

That might be a bit premature. In fact, right now I can't summon up more than one and a half. For these people are being killed without trial. There seems little doubt that the victims of Rab are indeed hardened criminals who live by murder and rapine -- but, to judge by newspaper and TV reports, this has not been proved in a court of law, the death sentence -- the ultimate the state can mete out to the individual -- has been passed and executed without benefit of judge and jury. The due process of law is being subverted, the most fundamental and precious human right of all, the right to life, is being violated.

This is persuasive, but not conclusive. It is argued, with reason, that the ordinary citizen in village and town, and aspiring entrepreneurs who produce the wealth of the nation, also have a right to the undisturbed possession of their life, liberty, and the pursuit of their occupation. It is alleged the normal institutions of

law enforcement are incapable of handling the problem because they are inefficient, undermanned, over-burdened, and corrupt, court proceedings thrive on faked evidence and false testimony, and are easily manipulated by people with financial or political power.

To let known criminals roam free from a nice regard for their right to life and liberty and the due process of law is the height of quixotry. It is one among many examples at an uncritical

application of a Western ethical code to a society and economy at a very different stage of development. Surely all these safeguards against arbitrary state power will make it impossible to maintain law and order and jeopardize our development, and, as pointed out above, deny the rights of ordinary citizens to a quiet and secure life.

It would seem, therefore, that there are persuasive arguments on both sides. A principled ambivalence, acknowledging the inherent messiness of social and political reality and refusing to take sides, may be the only intellectually honest stand. But that is not very helpful in selecting policies. A skeptic, as Bertrand Russell said, must still act on the assumption that the consequence of the action is known with certainty and can be evaluated without (too much) disagreement.

It is undeniable that one of the

most fundamental objectives of state policy, indeed, arguably the raison d'etre for the state, is the maintenance of law and order, the right of every citizens to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Hence, when crime has become so endemic that it seriously compromises this right, crime prevention takes priority and your right to open trial in a court of law loses ground to my right to security of life and livelihood. Some human rights must be (partially and temporarily

is to be found -- or rather, a partial, very imperfect approximation to it may be found in plodding, patient, painful and potentially dangerous social engineering, accepting and accommodating trade-offs, making inevitably contentious judgments about the rates at which two freedoms can be substituted for one another. In this process, something very like the Rab may be an inevitable accessory.

What is troubling about this particular operation is the extent

possibilities, one is that the deaths are indeed, the inevitable "collateral damage" attendant upon a gunfight in the dark. The forces of law and order must have the right to shoot in self-defense, otherwise they are operating under an impossible handicap. And if this is the claim, as it seems to be, then it would be pretty near impossible to prove otherwise, in a court of law. But the quite remarkable similarity of the episodes, specially the rural ones must give one pause --

without doing real damage to their rapid-response-qualities. I propose that the Rab (or any similar body) be explicitly mandated to "bring then back alive" and perhaps be offered a bonus for doing so. The detainees can be held under the Special Powers Act, (or a revised version) and tried before a special anti terrorist Tribunal if normal courts are overloaded.

Secondly, the constitution of bodies like the Rab may be made subject to parliamentary approval and subsequent oversight. This is on the assumption that Parliament actually works, which is unfortunately seldom the case in Bangladesh.

Thirdly, the government could try offering amnesties to at least some of the leftist groups. I imagine many of them would like nothing better than to come in from the cold.

Fourthly, journalists may be invited to accompany Rab units on their missions in an "embedded" capacity, they should naturally be warned not to get caught in a cross-fire.

The above may seem to be a recipe for introducing delays in the working of the system, specially given the state of the legal system. Of course nothing can replace a strong and independent judicial process. The Rab must not be seen as a handy substitute for one. One may liken them rather to temporary diversions on the highway to democracy, bumpy and dark and dangerous, but the only means of continuing on our journey while the breaches in the highway are being repaired.

AbuAbdullah is an eminent economist.

Are we becoming more intolerant?

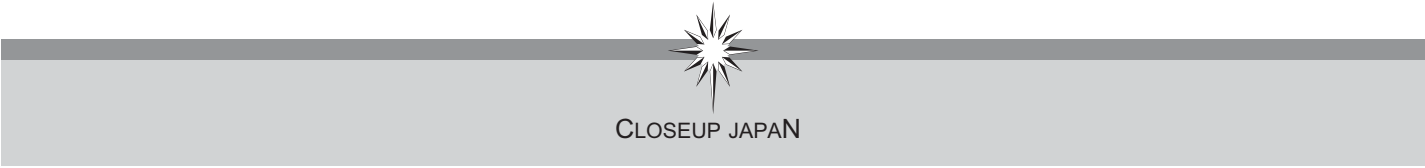
MONZURUL HUQ writes from Tokyo

THERE was a time not long ago, when things seemed to be moving towards a desired destination and long-cherished ideas envisioned by enlightened figures in human history looked well within our reachable goal. It was also a time of great divide that had drawn a firm boundary between the two opposite camps of self-proclaimed champions of humanity's well being. But despite that divide, mankind's onward journey towards progress didn't take a back seat and many of our common aspirations as civilized human being were gradually spreading their roots to various corners of the world and were being accepted by more and more people. As a result, such ideas were also considered to be essential components of our common values that make us worthy to be members of a modern civilized world. The call for abolishment of death penalty was one such gain that could hold ground in many Western nations as they took firm decisions to bury forever the practice of our collective cruelty in the name of justice.

Although a handful of advanced industrialized nations sadly remained out of that gain, it was commonly thought that they too would soon join the rank.

Then came the great opening that some dogmatic zealots did not hesitate to term as the end of history. The shallow dream they were dreaming throughout the period of Cold War had an unhappy impact on such high-flying proponents of an era of total dominance, as with the end of the Cold War they started to see everything wrong in the value of others. More then a decade on, we can now see few signs of the end of that history as the wheels of progress in a number of very important issues were turned backward to start a new journey towards old practices discarded earlier as being incompatible to a modern world. We saw the return of colonialism in the name of imposing democracy in some parts of the world and a threat to others of embracing the same fate if they fail to abide by the dictates of the powerful.

The great roll back in the name of ending history was not only confined in international politics. In social arenas too, the progress made in a



Japan's Cabinet office conducted the last survey in December and the result announced recently had shown a sharp rise in the rank of supporters of death penalty. The 81 percent figure of those favouring death penalty is up two percentage points from a survey five years ago. The result comes as a sad reminder that Japan would probably never reach the stage of European standard as more and more people are joining the other side of the campaign.

number of fields during the second half of twentieth century was compelled to make compromise with the new situation. No longer there is a growing voice of discontent about the widespread abuse by business and financial oligarchies that in the West took a corporate structure to disguise the faces of those who are in real control. Even in the media world, voice of intolerance is finding its firm footing as more and more news media are coming under direct control of few so called giants having other business interests as well.

There is no doubt that in terms of material advancement the twenty-first century has already offered many openings that were unthinkable if Cold War had to continue.

The unprecedented advancement in communications resulting in the abandoned flow of knowledge and information through the Internet is one such aspect. But how far we are using that knowledge for our self-development remains doubtful. This becomes obvious when we look closely to some aspects and trends in modern societies. Our desire for much more material gain is probably making us more intolerant compared to the generation that formulated most of the common values of the last century. The issue of death penalty is a very interesting barometer to judge that.

I've already mentioned at the beginning that in the second half of the last century many western

nations abolished the long held policy of sending people to the gallows for crimes seen in the eyes of others as extremely objectionable. The idea behind abolishing death penalty was derived from a new outlook about the purpose of judgment. If the idea behind judgment is to inflict pain to an offender for doing something seen wrong by the society, then there is nothing wrong in chopping hands, legs or fingers or sending offenders to the scaffold even for minor crimes. But if the purpose of judgment is to provide offenders with the opportunity to correct them by imposing certain restrictions, then there can be no justification in closing the door for that chance by killing offenders in

the name of law. A strong public opinion based on such teachings created pressure on respective governments of the western nations, and a number of countries in Europe abolished death penalty during the second half of the last century.

In Japan the idea of sending serious offenders to gallows is still in practice and there are occasional announcements made by the government that come as a reminder that in this particular aspect the country is yet to achieve what many western nations have achieved. But a very important ally of Japan in this field being the most powerful country of the present day world, things might not move straight for those in

Japan who are involved in relentless campaign to get rid of the most inhuman of all practice in the name of law. The government of Japan is maintaining a policy of continuation and there is no sign that campaigner could make any significant breakthrough despite winning isolated support even from the very high-ranking officials of the main ruling party.

Despite government's firm standing over the issue of death penalty, popular movement against the practice had made significant progress in Japan in the recent past. For example, a poll conducted by the government in 1975 had shown that 57 percent of those who participated said they were in favor of death penalty. Though the figure was relatively higher, it was still considered to be a gain as almost 40 percent said they opposed the idea. But strangely for Japan and to the dismay of campaigners for the abolishment of death penalty, the figure for those in favor of death penalty had since then shown a continuous rise, reaching 81 percent by the end of last month.

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result announced recently had shown a sharp rise in the rank of supporters of death penalty. The 81 percent figure of those favouring death penalty is up two percentage points from a survey five years ago. The result comes as a sad reminder that Japan would probably never reach the stage of European standard as more and more people are joining the other side of the campaign. In the latest survey those who said capital punishment should be abolished stood at a pathetic six-percentage point.

It might be a matter of insignificance to many. But the survey result in Japan reflects a common trend worldwide, as more and more people are becoming intolerant of things happening around them and expressing openly their desire to see an end, in whatever way possible, to the worsening situation that they face. We in this regard stand a few steps higher, as we do not hide our jubilation in seeing people being murdered cold bloodedly for the sake of ensuring safety of others. The people of Japan, at least, have not descended to that level yet.