

Making local govt. strong

Good recipe from experts

THANKS to the budget proposal for lump allocation to the LGED ministry and grassroots local government tiers, the elusive question of bottom-up self-governing institutions has come to the fore. Detractors are apt to point out that with 75 per cent of the fund apportionment to the sector being envisaged in lump form, public spending at the local levels could leave a lot to be desired in terms of quality. In fact, the fear is that there might be an opaque utilisation of the resources keeping in view the next general election, even though development projects, by their very definition, do not admit of political considerations superseding economic priorities which the Finance Minister himself is well-seized of, judging by his utterances from time to time.

At a timely roundtable titled *national budget and local government* which the Autonomous Union Parishad Advocacy Group -- a select group of politicians, economists, technocrats and advocacy experts -- organised on Monday, breathed some fresh air into an otherwise stale, on-going off-going, public discourse on local government system.

We have learned by now that elected bodies by themselves do not constitute a strong local government system *per se*. Nor can a pyramidal, bottom upwards structuring of it with connective layers be of any help in strengthening the system.

It is of paramount importance that quintessentially the local government institutions are autonomous and self-governing. So long as they are subjected to the meddling influence of MPs and bureaucrats, the realisation of their full potential will remain a far cry. It is true they will continue to be critically dependent on central government funding till such time as they are able to generate funds locally. That does not mean the purse-strings should be pulled by the central government, or worse, there would be any discrimination against the local government representatives perceived to be belonging to the opposition political parties. There we need a safeguard like autonomy to be built into the very system.

An independent local government system is indispensable for a fair, just and even-handed utilisation of increasing budgetary allocations to this vital sector of our national life. It is also a *sine qua non* for participatory democracy and good governance, which too we have learned the hard way after a long mental detour. It is high time we formulated laws to reduce executive control over local government institutions.

Not to be confused with a

censure

It's good counsel, actually

WHICHEVER way the detractors might look at it, there is no denying a general feeling that the Ahmadiyyas are being discriminated against and that more lie in store for them. This impression has especially gathered momentum overseas with some negative implications for our image, a prospect, or shall we say, a reality that must be overlooked or underplayed to be courting further damage to our standing in the international community.

Let's not forget, Bangladesh has been, for ages, known for such collective ethos as are inherently disposed towards communal harmony and tolerance of each other's faiths and beliefs. It is only when incitement were engineered by obscurantist elements trying to capitalise on religious sentiments of people that the trouble ensued. If the government would play even an ambivalent role, let alone that of a spectator to the dangers posed to social equilibrium, it could give encouraging signals to the elements out to destroy social peace.

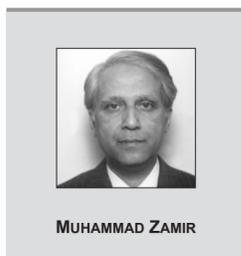
The discussion-meet organised by Bangladesh Ain-o-Salish Kendra, Bangladesh Society for Enforcement of Human Rights and Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust on the subject of 'Human Rights: Challenges Facing Bangladesh' brought us up-to-date with a latest assessment of the Ahmadiyya situation.

What has particularly drawn our attention is the observation made at the Dhaka seminar by Brad Adams, Executive Director of the Asia Division at the New York-based organisation Human Rights Watch (HRW). In his reckoning, the situation in Bangladesh has not become critical, which is why it is the right time to bring the issue up and tackle it -- before it goes out of hand.

Any independent observer would say this and there couldn't be any second opinion on the contention.

By way of resurrecting the status quo ante for the Ahmadiyyas, the ban on their publications and the removal of signboards from their mosques need to cease. Also, the incidents of intimidation, violence and harassment against the community must be effectively investigated and those responsible brought to justice.

Festering corruption



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THE recent past has seen the word corruption dominate the media. This malignancy of poor governance has become a festering sore that is eating away, corroding the 'elan vital' of our national life. A moral and legal problem, this illegitimate misappropriation of resources for private gain, has brought infamy for Bangladesh.

An impediment to development and a dis-incentive for foreign direct investment, corruption is affecting economic performance as well as poverty reduction. It is also being generally recognised that corruption is retarding economic growth by nearly 4 percent every year. Its all pervasive existence is now a sad commentary not only on the state of governance in successive governments but also on the absence of necessary political will to combat this pestilence.

A roundtable was recently organised by the Bangladesh Anti Corruption Commission (ACC) to discuss 'Corruption, Nature, Causes and Remedies'. Professor M. Yunus of the Grameen Bank participated in this meeting and came up with certain new approaches. In his own way, he tried to break down a complex problem into small manageable units -- each of which could be addressed separately and comprehensively.

Some of his observations were interesting. It included focussing on activities associated with certain

areas and departments of the government -- the Chittagong Port, the Tax Department and the Airport. He however left out, quite inexplicably, the corrupt elements that roam the offices of the water, gas and electricity supply departments, the Ministry of Works, the Ministry of Education, Land Administration, the Ministry of Communications and the Ministry of Health.

He also suggested the need for greater involvement of journalists

and departments of the government -- the Chittagong Port, the Tax Department and the Airport. He however left out, quite inexplicably, the corrupt elements that roam the offices of the water, gas and electricity supply departments, the Ministry of Works, the Ministry of Education, Land Administration, the Ministry of Communications and the Ministry of Health.

He also suggested the need for greater involvement of journalists

ship between business and politics has however not led to business-friendly public policies all the time. It has only contributed towards indirect corruption based on 'distribution of patronage in the form of import licences, public procurements and contracts, loan from NCBs and DFIs like the BSB and BSRS'.

It has also been noticed that election has in its own way become a business. Candidates 'see their

world. To quantify it, and to put relative numbers on assessments, will not necessarily always be correct. There are also the other factors -- that almost eighty percent of our population live in the rural areas and that our economic base is rather limited. Yes, corruption is pervasive in Bangladesh but how is it more serious than Nigeria?

Our corruption is probably reflected in the visible informal urban economy -- in the surfeit of

Anti-Corruption Bureau. It now has to ensure that the ACC does not degenerate into a mechanism for personal and political vendetta. The ACC, after several months, has been able to adopt a draft organogram with proposed 70 offices all over the country. Nevertheless, the public perception about ACC continues to be negative. It is still considered to be non-functional, not totally independent and without adequate financial support.

The World Bank, the IMF and the ADB have all urged that ACC be made effective and have also offered financial support for this purpose. They have done so because they believe that development support from the donor community would not be meaningful unless the widespread corruption prevailing in the country is curbed. The government should not only take advantage of such support but also ascertain from such international agencies how corruption arising out of interfacing of the public and private sectors can be suitably tackled.

What we definitely need today is large scale awareness building among the citizens. Having an ombudsman, a de-politicised judiciary and civil service will also contribute significantly to the anti-corruption effort. This disease can only be contained through sustained groundswell support from ordinary people and active assistance from a pro-active, bi-partisan political leadership which believes in transparency and disclosure of personal wealth.

I strongly believe that reducing the cost of doing business in Dhaka will promote economic growth and poverty reduction. There is no other option.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador -- any response to mzamir@dhaka.net

POST BREAKFAST

What we definitely need today is large scale awareness building among the citizens. Having an ombudsman, a de-politicised judiciary and civil service will also contribute significantly to the anti-corruption effort. This disease can only be contained through sustained groundswell support from ordinary people and active assistance from a pro-active, bi-partisan political leadership

and the civil society. This was good. His other proposals however left me sceptical. This was about the creation of 'sufferers groups', the publication of market rates of corruption and the identifying of a corruption index for different government agencies and ministries. These smacked of being idealistic and impractical.

He appears to have forgotten that doing business with different government departments is always on a less than level playing field. He also seems to have overlooked the axiom of socio-metric overlays. In this context, it is most unlikely that local businessmen will agree to identify themselves as 'sufferers' or participate in a survey to peg corruption indicators in a ministry. They would be blacklisted and could kiss their chances good-bye for departments which rely on tenders for public work or for purchases.

He has, however, made two important points -- a) that of identifying corruption within the ACC itself and b) that corruption breeds in the

This also stops all officials, at all levels, from extracting money through delay or threat of delay in decision-making.

Implementing such a scenario would be desirable, but most difficult given the nexus between politics and business in this country. Here, most unfortunately, most of the members in the responsible positions in the government (including the Cabinet) are directly or indirectly (through members of their families) involved in business.

Nevertheless, Yunus's interest is praiseworthy. The government should seriously consider taking him up on his proposals and appointing him as Special Adviser to the Chairman of the ACC. It would indeed be revealing to see how the head of a large, successful NGO, now a significant business corporation, handles the complex factors that guide corruption in this country.

He has an international image and would probably try harder than most to safeguard his reputation. In Bangladesh, the close relation-

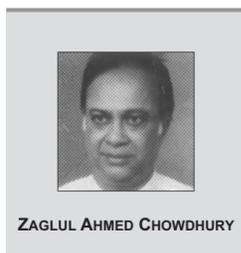
expenditures on election as an investment, expecting to double the return whatever the cost' (Mashur Rahman, 'Corruption: Economic and Political Perspectives'). This process has probably assisted in capital formation through 'kleptocracy' (as some economists like to term it), but this has also meant deterioration in terms of ethical as well as social standards. In fact, few will deny, that in contemporary Bangladesh, politics has been a significant factor associated with criminalisation of society. Black money and mastaans have eroded values and spurred ambition and greed. This has to stop.

Any discussion on corruption also requires a mention about the methodology to be employed in this regard. Like many others I do not agree with the system used by Transparency International in ranking countries in terms of corruption. This is a controversial and debatable exercise particularly because corruption is present in varying degrees in all countries of

reconditioned cars, in real estate and also in the construction sector. Like the past few years, the government has again made arrangements to whitewash black money in the budget for 2005-06. Unfortunately, this malaise has not stopped. This was not the right thing to do. Our finance minister should have stuck to his guns. He has gone back on his own words and also refused to honour the views of the Anti Corruption Commission in this regard. Past experience indicated that most of the untaxed money worth Taka 1,775 crore (that came into the formal economy through this method between July 2002 and December 2004) ended up, according to economists, in the non-production, non-profitable real estate sector. In a manner of speaking, this policy will help to prolong for another year, the growth of corruption.

Under pressure from the donor community, the government has also taken the significant step of constituting the ACC and doing away with the

South Asian collective security -- a complex but noble idea



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

SECURITY is a big issue in the South Asian region where, many people think, much of the efforts for progress and collective development will not bear expected fruit unless the security system is improved and an atmosphere conducive to cooperation existed. Admittedly, such an atmosphere is a pious hope to a large extent given the harsh realities that characterise the political and military conditions in the region even though this unhealthy situation can be attributed mainly to the traditional enmity of two neighbours India and Pakistan. Nuclearisation of both the rivals has undoubtedly added a dangerous dimension to the security concept in the South Asia, which is the home of more than one fifth of the humanity. In the event of any use of the nuclear weapon in the region a possibility that may look remote in the current political environment in the area because of the reconciliatory endeavour by the two principal rivals but cannot be fully ruled out in the context of their long and bitter belligerence -- all the nations of the region will have to bear the brunt of the atomic catastrophe.

The conventional military tensions are there, but the introduction of nuclear capability by the two

major regional nations has plunged the area into possibilities of alarming proportions. South Asia is already an international flash point because of the arms race in the region and the money that is being spent here for defence is really something horrifying. Two celebrated personalities of the region have made no bones of the fact that South Asia need peace and security should its people improve the quality of life. The region is poverty-

terms of proportional expenses in the sector compared to their income. He made a forceful plea for reduction of the allocations in the military and divert to areas related to socio-economic development. No wonder such pleas will land only in deaf ears since the protagonists of the arms race would place many factors to justify the expenses and their arguments are also not necessarily without basis. Nevertheless, when internationally reputed econo-

people, who want to get rid of perennial hunger and other chronic problems and some taste of decent livelihood. True, poverty is not the case for all, but certainly the large segment of the people is unfortunate and mired in serious economic problems.

There is hardly any denying that much of the socio-economic progress in the region which is inextricably linked with the welfare of the people, is contingent upon the

collective security would have done great service to the on-going efforts of collective cooperation. Arguably, security is a big concept and it encompasses many matters that have wide ranging implications and need to be analysed in the context of larger global and regional perspective. Nonetheless, a broad parameter for South Asian security system can be considered for overall improvement of the political climate in the area. The current time is

critically important subject with a view to creating a better political environment in the region that would facilitate goodwill and harmony, which in turn, will promote the desired cooperation in various fields among the nations of the area.

"We resolve to get out of the strait-jacket of enmity, overcome obsession with over-demanding militaristic security paradigm and look beyond the traditional notions of security and focus on an integrated South Asian cooperative security that recognises interdependence and mutuality of interests" said an agreed resolution adopted at the conference last month participated mainly by the leading parliamentarians of the regional countries and also others including editors and senior journalists, experts and academics. Without prejudice to the current positions of the SAARC governments on amending the SAARC charter, the conference called upon the SAARC to initiate a study of mechanisms for cooperative security in the region. In a remarkable agreed view, the participants cutting across national and domestic political divide said given the increasingly intrusive nature of the international political system, it is imperative that the region developed its own security and conflict resolution mechanisms.

Such resolution, somewhat unprecedented in this tension ridden region, definitely represents something that we all are longing for in line with the larger good of the more than 1.4 billion people in the region. South Asian collective security system is not anything impossible even though this is very complex and may take time for seeing the light of the day.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is a senior journalist.

MATTERS AROUND US

Some experts feel that five principles -- a commitment to the UN charter and UN resolutions, preservation of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the states in the region and non-intervention in internal affairs, commitment to SAARC convention for the protection of human rights including the rights of minorities, commitment to specified "cooling off" timeframe and dialogue in the case of a crisis and lastly, a strategic stability regime can form a broad basis of a security system.

ridden with many people remaining mired in abject poverty as hunger, illiteracy and ill health stalk the region. But in stark contrast, the military expenditure here is huge and by any estimate it is simply not only highly disproportional to the economic strength of the countries of the region, but also largely at the cost of the socio-economic development that could have directly benefited the vast segment of the people.

Late Dr. Mahbubul Haq, the well known economist from Pakistan, who had established a human development institute in Islamabad and made untiring efforts till his death for improving the human resource index of the regional countries, concluded that defence expenditures by India and Pakistan are by far much larger than many oil-rich Gulf nations when viewed in

mist like Dr. Haq makes such prognosis about the economic conditions of South Asia, evidently the case of lessening military expenditures gets a boost.

Nobel laureate in economics, Dr. Amartya Sen, much of whose works and highly acclaimed thesis is based on the poverty of developing and least developed countries like those in South Asia, has also stressed the need for greater expenditures in the welfare oriented sectors for the benefit of the masses. Once again, it will be a height of folly to expect that their logic for bigger expenditures in social sectors by reducing it in the military will be heeded to by those who are at the helm and find enough justification in the high defence expenditures. The poverty-ridden South Asia needs to come out from this situation for the sake of its

overall security system in the area and this is crucially important for the SAARC as a whole. Conventional military development along the nuclearisation has created a sense of insecurity and instability for the region. It is being increasingly felt that there is a need for evolving a cooperative security milieu here in order to give South Asia political security and stability, which in turn, will have tremendous bearing on the socio-economic development. Within this broad framework, a South Asian peace and security system can provide the beginning of a much needed structure that will help substantial multilateral cooperation in the SAARC region.

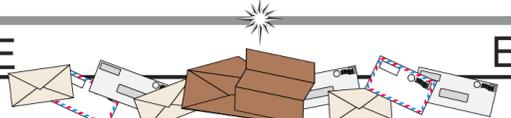
Many experts opine varying views about the efficacy and effectiveness of a kind of security system in the traditionally trouble-prone region, but agree that a sense of

particularly appropriate for such a thinking since the present positive trend of reconciliation among the belligerents and closer ties among others should encourage a better security system in the region.

Some experts feel that five principles -- a commitment to the UN charter and UN resolutions, preservation of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the states in the region and non-intervention in internal affairs, commitment to SAARC convention for the protection of human rights including the rights of minorities, commitment to specified "cooling off" timeframe and dialogue in the case of a crisis and lastly, a strategic stability regime can form a broad basis of a security system.

A recent important South Asian conference in Pakistan has thrown enough light on this complex but

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



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Statistics of investigation committee

I am fed up with the news of formation of committee to investigate some incidents, especially that are formed by the government. It is learnt from a news broadcast that a committee has been formed to investigate the recent accidental death of a university student girl.

I think people would also like to know more about such committees. If I were a member of the parliament, I would have asked the government to give statistical information on such committees that have been formed to investigate various incidents since December 1971, and to publish reports on these committees for general people's information.

It would be more accurate if classified under political category and non-political category. I expect that

the government have all the records. I am not sure any other organisation has complete records and can publish the same. The second issue is that how one can make it mandatory on the part of the government to complete every investigation and publish reports irrespective of the report being good, bad or controversial. (India has very recently passed (or about to pass) the Freedom of Information Act following the line of the United States. Bangladesh being a democratic country should enact Freedom of Information Act. This will uplift the image of Bangladesh at home and abroad.

A Bangladeshi abroad
One e-mail

Students' activity

I am a regular reader of your newspaper's on-line version. I'd like to

make a few comments on the reporting of the recent DU conflict.

Well, it is natural to grieve over the death of a fellow student by road accident, but I do not understand the lawlessness that was shown by students by burning buses and creating chaos which must have endangered more innocent lives in that area. No reasonable person in a civilised world can support this kind of action. There are lots of other ways to bring justice, like filing cases against the bus company etc. I have been seeing this kind of reaction after road accident all over Bangladesh. It's time you (the newspapers and other media) take a stance against this kind of behaviours by general public to bring some civility in our society. It cannot go on like this forever if we'd like to be part of a civilised world. And any media, whatever affiliation they may have, should play their responsible part to

advance the country against lawlessness, corruption and misbehaviour of some that think it is a rule rather than exception to do so.

I hope I was able to make my point clear. It is not only a problem with a certain group or political party but the whole country behaves like this. There must be something wrong with our people and it needs to be addressed. Grievance for one death should not bring more death that is my point.

M. Chowdhury
Dallas, USA

Bangladeshis abroad

Many of our *deshi* friends have the eagerness to come back to Bangladesh, but whenever they mention this to their families, hell breaks loose. I am talking about something that happens very often. Well my dear friends I want to share some experience that I had. When my

father decided to come back to Bangladesh, I was in South Africa studying in a Darul Uloom. My dad called me and told me to make *duas* for my elder brother as he was in a very troublesome situation.

What happened was when my brother found out that they were going back, this marred his judgement as he was in no mood to come to Bangladesh. So the day they were supposed to fly out, early that morning he left the house. The whole day past but there was no sign of him. As the time approached for going to the airport, my parents got very worried. Alhamdulillah, finally after many *duas* he appeared dishevelled.

My point is such incidents take place over and over and the solution to these problems is simple. Before I start with the solution, let's see the problem. The very first problem that arises is lack of so-called freedom in

Bangladesh, and the media plays a great role in placing Bangladesh as an unsuitable place for them.

So my suggestion is -- come to Bangladesh on a vacation and get your kids enrolled in any academic institution and let them get the feel of it. As soon as they get some friends here they will automatically fall in place. That's exactly what happened to my brother. Today if you ask him if he wants to go back, he will definitely say no. If you ask him why, he will say the friends I've made while in Bangladesh are incomparable to those in US.

Ubaiddullah Awal
One e-mail

Tribute to late Prof. Naiyar Sultana

Greatly admired by her friends, colleagues, students, and relatives for her amiable, constantly cheerful

and virtuous character, professor Naiyar Sultana breathed her last at 6:15 PM on 15 May, 2005 at the Intensive Care Unit of Dhaka Central Hospital after a prolonged and brave encounter with dreadful cancer.

Late Prof. Naiyar Sultana was a dedicated teacher who had efficiently taught Botany at Eden Girls' college for long 32 years. She had creditably served as the Principal of Dhaka College, Director General of Secondary & Higher Secondary Education, Member of Bangladesh Public Service Commission.

On some occasions, I had the opportunity to have discussed with Prof. Naiyar Sultana professional matters at her office. She was progressive minded and very much committed to her official responsibilities. When she was the Principal of Dhaka College, she undertook various development works, which include construction of the bound-

ary wall and eviction of unauthorised inmates. At one stage, she collected some papers from me related to our academic council and other administrative committee (then were one institute) for redesigning different academic and administrative units of Dhaka College.

Not only in her official arena, Prof. Naiyar had proved her acumen and efficacy but in family matters she was very transparent as well. She used to always stand by the side of the right things. She never hesitated to boldly pass her ruling in favour of what was evidently correct.

On the sad demise of Prof. Naiyar Sultana the country has lost a great teacher, patriot, and a reformer. I pray to Allah for the eternal peace of her soul.

Prof. M Zahidul Haque
Shere-e-Bangla Agricultural University
Dhaka-1207