

Utter neglect of consumer rights

Absence of legal safeguards shameful

At first, there were snapshot reports in the print and electronic media on an abominable spate in food concoctions, manufacture of other spurious products, and their sales in the open market. Then come the mobile court raids that reveal the appalling magnitude of crimes being committed against public health. Although the crackdown on the recalcitrant business in food and drugs has been publicly welcomed, it cannot be a sustainable option; and that's exactly where the absence of a consumer rights protection law is felt.

But it is dumbfounding to note that such a law has been under preparation for the last 13 years! At least five drafts have been made in all that time and the commerce and law ministries have apparently failed to reach any conclusion in the last one year. That's indeed a glaring example of indifference having been shown to the rights of consumers, strangely at the government level.

Now, the question is: how do we tackle, on a durable basis, the grave threat to public health that adulteration and sale of substandard food items pose? The draft law on the table envisages some measures like setting up of a consumers' council and a bureau of consumers' affairs to safeguard their rights. The law, when enacted, will deal with infringements on the rights of consumers like charging exorbitant prices, providing substandard service, selling low quality commodities, shortchanging on weights and measures, creating an artificial crisis, etc.

Though belatedly, the government is rightly thinking in terms of amending the 46-year-old law on food production and sale. Alongside introducing harsher punishments, provisions should be there for aggrieved citizens to initiate legal proceedings against dishonest elements which are conspicuously absent today.

The businessmen should want to be involved in the overall fight against the illegal practices. We believe that the campaign against spurious and adulterated goods will help the *bona fide* businessmen in a very perceptible way. They won't have to bother much about fake products being sold under their brand names. It's a question of protecting their credibility.

We look forward to a comprehensive consumer rights protection law being enacted in the next session of parliament along with amendments made to the archaic law on food production and sale.

Demolition is not enough

Law must take its course

The action taken by Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) on Tuesday to demolish an under-construction market owned by BNP ward commissioner Monwar Hossain Dijpal on the bank of the Turag at Borobazar in Mirpur is to be commended.

Land grabbing and encroachment of riverine bodies is one of the most serious and intractable problems facing the country today. It is the most despicable of crimes since it involves the taking of land that is the public's for private benefit, and is dependent on those in authority turning a blind eye and abusing the trust the public has placed in them. No crime is more symptomatic of the problems that all Bangladesh today -- that of private individuals getting rich at the expense of the public good.

This kind of offence is invariably committed by those who are close to power. This kind of abuse of power occurs because those who perpetrate it think that they are immune to punishment due to their connections, and in too many cases this has been proven to be true.

The only way to stop this brazen and arrogant flouting of the law is to go after the lawbreakers without consideration for their connections or political affiliation. It is not enough to demolish the structures that they have built up. The only way that other violators and their collaborators will be deterred is if the relevant authorities treat them like the criminals that they are.

Typically what happens in cases such as these is that once the dust has settled and attention has shifted, that violators quietly resume their illegal activities. No one is ever brought to justice. The relevant authorities should be freed to aggressively pursue the violators and the public prosecutor needs to be brought in to ensure that punishment is swift and severe.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

ACCORDING to one view there are periods in world history which are characterised by a less of the sense of values. Some are of the considered opinion that we in Bangladesh are living in pre-eminently such an age. There is a feeling that the inner strength of our people which enabled them to hold their heads high despite economic adversity is in the process of being lost without durable measures to shed poverty. It is true that in a democracy the majority view should prevail but perhaps that does not mean that the validity of a proposition or the correctness of a strategy should depend on the number of people and their representative who believe in it. There is an old saying that in the fields of politics and economics, the soundness of a policy is often in inverse proportion to the popular support it commands. Equally significant is the belief that the quality of life in our democratic polity is largely determined by the availability of the basic human rights and civil liberties, which are placed in the chapter on 'Fundamental Rights' in our constitution. Without these fundamental rights the quality of life would be gravely impaired.

The guarantee of the aforementioned fundamental rights is largely conditional upon the fostering and sustaining of a healthy debate on the country's social and economic problems by an articulate, independent, non-partisan and tolerant intellectual community. They need to take clear-cut stand on issues of national importance and fight for them. It would appear that our intellectuals are collectively indifferent to the

future of the country, while the ruling classes instead of fostering the nationhood have deepened the crisis of conflict on basic political issues. The politicians have often used this as an alibi for their lack of performance.

Protest and restructuring

According to some observers, the most remarkable fact of our political life is the absence of public response to the erosion of order in civil society. The near supine acceptance of many indignities and excesses inflicted upon citizens by arrogant authorities is a blight for which the entire privi-

leged and well-off section of our society and all thinking people bear responsibility. The privileged pay lip service to the idea of social change in order to ease their conscience and often they venture to search for alibis for their callousness. One does not find the timely exertion of enough pressures for reforms and restructuring. No wonder, therefore, that the leadership in different segments of our country reflect the prevailing values and power structure of the society.

Our institutions are not in total decay, the present crack and all the efforts to create an institutional vacuum notwithstanding. It is true that violence is widespread in our society. The writ of the

government does not run in some pockets. In urban focal points there is lawlessness, which has aggravated the feeling of insecurity. To make matters worse, there is the near breakdown of the urban infrastructure. However, for records it must be stated that many other countries have faced a similar situation at various stages of their history but their educated and privileged classes did not pronounce that their country was doomed. The fortunate in those countries played their part with responsibility and helped in bringing the country back on rails. There are premonitions

regarding the rise of Taliban type militancy. While it has to be admitted that religious fanaticism, bigotry and militancy are on the rise with allegations of foreign supporters and financiers and local protectors, the same definitely does not compare with the phenomenal rise of Taliban in Afghanistan in the yesteryears. The so-called fanatics or fundamentalists no doubt represent a new underclass with all the potential of causing unrest and turmoil in the country but democrats in our polity have not embarked upon adequate countervailing measures to ensure that the obscurantist elements do not strike deeper roots than the political party and taking advantage of the situation turn peoples resentment into a revolutionary move-

ment. Such a scenario is likely in the background of the repression by state coercive authorities, the vulgar life style of the new rich and the stark disparities in income distribution. We have to take guard. When our middle classes talk about a revolution, they perhaps wish the emergence of a strong, competent, upright and ruthless leader who will purge society of all corruption and punish the entire ruling class that has looted and plundered the resources of the country without any remorse. From where will emerge such a leader? Nobody knows for cer-

The need for a vision

In contemporary Bangladesh there is a feeling that we are perhaps focusing too much on peripheral issues while ignoring the centre of the problem. At the political level, there is concentration on symptoms rather than on the disease. There is often emphasis on short-term simplistic

solutions for complex problems. There is not much effort to embark on sustainable remedies. The obvious question is, if the problems are not appreciated in depth and the diagnosis made accordingly then how would we arrive at real solutions? There are recent examples which illustrate this inference. Urban unrest is taken merely as a law and order problem and treated as such.

Instead of changing the colonial police structure and stopping its use as a political arm of the government, an answer is sought in creating the so-called 'elite' forces, or increasing the number

made possible by the recommendations of the aforementioned visionaries.

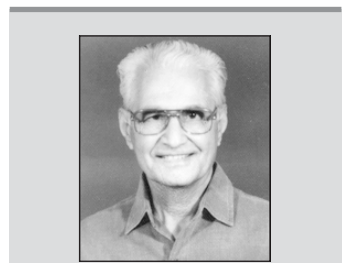
In Bangladesh a great deal appears to be ad hoc and tentative and there is an impression that we are living from day to day. The question is, are we witnessing an institutional crisis of state authority? Black money holders and violators of other descriptions have created centres of power nearly parallel to that of the state, according to many discerning observers. However, for any programme of social and economic development to be durably implemented, it is necessary to fully establish the writ of the government and made it run throughout the country.

In the yesteryears there were public servants, professionals and politicians who practiced the frugality, simplicity and integrity enjoined by our religion. Now even the middle classes have developed highly acquisitive instincts and politics largely is a game of power, pelf and privilege. Whether the good folks of earlier times succeeded or not is another matter but many young men now prioritise government jobs only in terms of money and power. They perhaps cannot deliver because they do not want to excel in life by being proud of their county and their vocations. We definitely need idealists and dreamers as distinguished from the money-minded and the avaricious. We need people for whom money is not everything. Priority is for reasonably honest and down-to-earth leadership.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a former Secretary and IGP

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Dark clouds on the horizon



M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

PAKISTANI and Indian officials met in Delhi to discuss and arrive at agreed confidence building measures in pursuit of what is called a Nuclear Restraint Regime. The result was formalisation of previously agreed pre-informing of the test flights of missiles. Just that and nothing more substantial. These meetings virtually coincided with the 60th anniversary of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings. The world has, instead of turning away from the evil weapons, become more nuclearised. There are at least nine nuclear powers and more may be on the way. They pose unacceptable threats to not only the stated enemies of each nuclear power, but also to the people and controllers of atomic weapons in each state. India and Pakistan are prone to nuclear conflict as well as being vulnerable to letting wrong fingers reach the button. This has to be avoided at all costs.

The background has to be noted. Right now, there is a veritable maelstrom of geopolitical struggles in Asia. There is, on the one hand, the US with its drive to supposedly promote democracy and stability, and gain control of strategic raw material to underpin its domination of the world economy despite its economic weak-

nesses. On the other side, is the Security Cooperation Organization that brings Central Asian Republics in an alliance with China and Russia that have had their own rapprochement a decade ago. This SCO has already served notice on the US that it should wind up its bases in Asia and stop dreaming about dominating Asia. They want a more "democratic" relationship among states. That is, lines are being drawn among Asian nations.

why it is lifting the various sanctions that were imposed on India after the May 1998 nuclear tests at Pokhran -- if its legislature agrees. Pakistan's reaction was predictable. It was one of consternation: Pakistan had hitched its wagon to the American star and American support for its security is the basic assurance that Islamabad had. That is now under question. Doubtless, the Americans promise, and are sure

break down. It may even die. Why? because intensification of nuclear arms race and missiles will actually produce a radical mistrust. This is because each addition to India's nuclear arsenal means further weakening of Pakistan's defences. And vice versa; each increase in Pakistan's nuclear arsenals equals India's increased vulnerability. For, there is absolutely no defence against a nuclear attack, all talk of ABMs

of police personnel. Similar myopia prevails in the education sector where new institutions are being established without ensuring their proper functioning. Another related query is, are we having serious shortage of intellectual input from politicians, policy makers and planners? After the 'Comilla model of development' of Late Dr. Akhter Hameed Khan we have Dr. Yunus's, 'Grameen Bank model' for economic emancipation. Both the models have been adapted beyond erstwhile East Pakistan and present day Bangladesh with considerable success. However, we need more visionaries who can guide us in different spheres of national life. The solutions to our myriad problems demand broad conceptual framework

that goes the number and quality of missiles -- is a compulsion in South Asia because of adversarial assumptions and attitudes. They have in fact intensified all arms races and America's own war industries have made profits at a time when the outlook for them was becoming clouded.

The two countries are chasing a solution of the problem o two sets of inimical deterrents sitting close to each other. The logic of this situation increases mistrust exponentially, resulting in arms races that multiply mistrust. CBMs are fair weather birds; they work while the relationship is normal. As tensions grow over the aggravation of one or more disputes, CBMs are forgotten and generals on either side rush to prepare for action. Hasn't the world seen 1999's half war and 2002's very real threat of a general war? The situation was saved by America and not by the CBMs already in place. Who remembered them in either Islamabad or New Delhi? No, CBMs are not even half a solution. The Subcontinent needs a full solution.

The question is what should India and Pakistan do? India needs to have a long-term Pakistan policy, even if it wants to be a great military power with enough political influence, with or without a permanent seat in UNSC. Pakistan does not need to be congenitally programmed to oppose India in all things. Pakistanis should let India go its way and let Indians fare as well as they can. Let us not have similar ambition. Let Pakistan be content with economic development actually reducing the poverty of the masses.

MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

PLAIN WORDS

CBMs are fair weather birds; they work while the relationship is normal. As tensions grow over the aggravation of one or more disputes, CBMs are forgotten and generals on either side rush to prepare for action. Hasn't the world seen 1999's half war and 2002's very real threat of a general war? The situation was saved by America and not by the CBMs already in place. Who remembered them in either Islamabad or New Delhi? No, CBMs are not even half a solution. The Subcontinent needs a full solution.

Closer to home we have seen India in close embrace with the US in recent weeks. India and America will closely cooperate in the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea in various tasks that America thinks is its duty to perform. The Indians will assist them. The Americans have promised to make India a global military power and new technologies will be inducted into India from the US. Co-production of aircrafts and other sensitive technologies is on the cards. India's cooperation in nuclear control measures has been sought by America and promised by India. America will provide nuclear reactors for civilian power generation. America is already treating India as a virtually declared nuclear power and a close friend of America like Britain and France have been. Which is

to provide, Pakistan with some war material as and when they adjudge is needed. But Pakistanis will try to get what the Indians are trying to obtain. Indo-Pakistan nuclear arms race is sure to become even more intense. The competition in acquiring conventional armaments too shall increase. Pakistan will try and obtain everything from guns and tanks to nuclear reactors from no matter where. Either the Americans shall be forced to supply more equipment to Pakistan at the risk of annoying India, or Pakistan will seek even closer military and other cooperation with China. Pakistan thinks it has a strong China card in hand. Pakistan might buy from Russia too.

One result of all this may be that the peace process, still underway, will probably stumble and

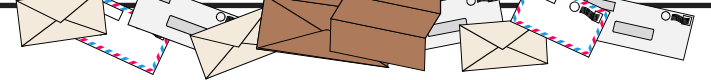
and missile defence systems notwithstanding.

The main problem between India and Pakistan needs to be clearly formulated. Differences originate in their adversarial attitudes and purposes. History has created these. These issues need to be sorted out and agreements have to be arrived at. Among the issues, eight have been recognised. It is a good working elaboration. But one thinks that while even Kashmir -- historically the most intractable -- seems now amenable to some solution, as things were evolving up to last year, after all is said and done about the seven disputes being discussed, one consequential issue stands out: it is the existence of two rival nuclear deterrents confronting each other eyeball to eyeball. This is a problem that defies

of these vested interests depend on the continuation of nuclear arms race between India and Pakistan. In both countries, these groups are powerful and possess ample resources. Their ability to ensure unending flow of resources into nuclear programs is certain. And yet the goal needs to be kept in mind. It is denuclearisation of South Asia and making it nuclear weapons free zone.

The Americans have done a grievous disservice by popularising the suggestion that India and Pakistan need not destroy their nuclear weapons and missiles. They should keep them despite the consequent compulsion of an unending arms race between them. So long as Indian deterrent is being updated and proliferated, vertically and horizontally, Pakistan too would act likewise.

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.

An appeal

It is said that communication is one of the core areas for a country to develop. In any part of the country, it plays a vital role in everybody's life.

Madartek, a densely populated area under Shabujbag PS, has been neglected for quite a long period. During elections, candidates keep holding out hopes for doing everything possible to mitigate our sufferings. But nothing has changed so far, the roads in the area are in bad shape.

The relevant authorities should look into the matter.
Md. Kabir Hossain
Shabujbagh
Dhaka

Wastage of foreign exchange

It appears that faulty import poli-

cies result in huge wastage of foreign exchange (the dollar now creeping up to Tk 67), through import of luxury and non-essential items, as also foreign RMG (readymade garments); as seen in the posh air-conditioned shops in the a/c shopping malls. These shoppers with excess money in pocket represent less than one per cent of the shoppers in the whole country. Does it represent the ADP policy?

How our garments (including famous name brands) are inferior to the RMG made in other developing countries, when we earn about five billion dollars a year feeding the EU and the US? The shop management pleads that shoppers prefer foreign goods, just for the glamour of it.

The government should start a campaign to buy *swadeshi* goods,

as their quality has improved much during the last 10 years. The newly rich like to show their wealth.

[I noticed the same tendency in Japan in the late 1960s in Tokyo, when I was buying Japanese products, while the Japanese seen in the shops and footpaths carried foreign cameras, pens and other items, while the shops were full of imported products).

Even furniture and fruit juices are imported, when we can export the same without much effort, as the infrastructure now has depth and breadth. The cultural monitoring is poor at the official level. What steps are being taken to channelise social trends? The young are going West (from 50 km to 10,000 km away).

It is a mystery that when even one per cent of our huge RMG production is not released formally in the

market (not factory rejects which are sold cheaply in the footpaths and Bango Bazar), the shopping culture has no *swadeshi* touch, while the political leaders parade the public meetings with overflowing kurtas with extra-long sleeves which cover the palms also (no blue collar business).

Political hypocrisy is not good for the nation, in the long run!
AMahseen
Dhaka.

Sheba project

Please refer to the DS news item (26.07.05) "Sheba Phone to launch wireless fixed phones in rural areas by December." Being a retired Telecom Engineer working for more than thirty five years, this came as a big surprise not because of the project itself but because of the motive to uplift the socio-economic

condition of the rural masses of Bangladesh. Most of the telecom operators have taken the licence with the basic idea of doing a profitable business but "Sheba Phone" clearly shows it is a service oriented project.

I will strongly recommend the government and various departments to assist the organisation in fulfilling its dreams.
Mohammed Alauddin
Retd. Member (M&O) BTTB
Dhaka

Lost smile

The commuter buses were plying with hooting horns to strike the eardrum of the passengers, as usual. The emitting smoke was troublesome and the waiting people were rubbing their eyes in response. I got on to a bus and saw the conductor whom I knew. The memory he pushed in me was his spontane-

ous full-throated singing without caring for anybody. I encouraged him to carry on. His harsh romantic voice filled me with a sense of joy and excitement.

But he could not sing for long. A passenger, certainly not interested in the conductor's type of music, asked him to stop. The man didn't have many options. He stopped and concentrated on collecting fares, his main job. There was silence, but I could not like it. The smile on the conductor's face suddenly disappeared. We are not good at encouraging people trying something different. On this occasion, it was like muffling the spontaneity of a raw singer.

Abdullah-al-Mujahid
Department of English
Dhaka University
IRA decision
The IRA has ordered laying down

of arms, after decades of confrontation. The decision came after the fireworks in London [7/7 and subsequent Thursday effect] Common danger ushers in intimations of unity. Live and learn, to be able to live peacefully, and assure the same to the younger generations.

There are signs of initial overtures towards surges of unity among at the Muslim countries. The latter are too divided, with huge communication and economic gaps. Islam ruled the world for centuries, before the tide, or the sine wave, turned. Live and learn; necessity is the mother of invention.

South Asia is suffering, for half a century, from the after-effects of partition of India in 1947. Religion divides, but it should not, as the Creator for all is one and the same. What is the fuss about: in the medium, or in the message?

Bangladesh has a role to play,

however local or small. How our leaders are sending the signals to the masses? There is too much brinkmanship at the leadership levels. The stars cannot be touched; come down to mother earth.

AZ
Dhaka

We applaud

We applaud the role played by DS and other newspapers against adulterationa social vice of unfathomable magnitude.

We hope you will continue to play the same constructive role in all such matters in the future as well.

Mansoor Raja
Dhaka