

Confidence in Bangladesh's moderate image

We welcome the regional gesture

IT is good to see confidence being reposed in the capability of Bangladesh to play a leadership role in the Muslim world in upholding the true spirit of Islam. This was expressed through a declaration adopted at an international seminar on Islam as a religion of peace, progress and harmony, held recently in Dhaka. We are happy with the outcome of the seminar since it reiterated the long held positions of Islam on major issues, particularly the most topical one of terrorism.

Bangladesh can be truly proud of its longstanding tradition of espousing the best of Islam, its universal and inclusive character, its principles of moderation and peaceful coexistence with other religions and faiths. This universal character, it ought to be stressed, manifested among other things, through the teaching and precepts of our Sufi saints which asserted and spread the inner message of Islam. It dwelt not only on the equality of man but also emphasised the innate philosophy through the very appellation of the religion itself, 'Islam' meaning peace.

It is therefore regrettable, something which the seminar deliberations also highlighted, that Islam is being used to propagate violence and conflict, by misinterpreting its teachings and injunctions. And this is where we feel that the religious scholars must come in a very robust way to denounce this proclivity, particularly when it is a minuscule minority that seems to have hijacked Islam while the majority are unable to exercise any restraints on their wayward co-religionists. The tactic adopted by some Muslims in contrast to and gross violation of the teachings of Islam is tainting the image of the entire Islamic fraternity, regrettably.

We also note with concern the unholy propensity of using theological precepts to advance narrow parochial and political interests by some. And here again we must say that the Islamic scholars, both in Bangladesh as well as in other Muslim countries, have failed to play their due part by not being sufficiently vocal against political use of religion.

Thus, while we welcome all that has been stated in the seminar, what we would have liked to have heard also are expressions of substantive plans and formulation of definitive strategy that would help in deterring those that are misusing the teachings of Islam and defiling its image.

Going about the voter list

EC has no time to spare on controversies

WE welcome the clarification issued by the Election Commission (EC) on media reports saying that the EC was thinking of engaging the Gram Sarkar heads in the exercise of preparing the voter list for the next general election. We would like to believe that the EC has cleared the air of confusion about using local government members in preparing the electoral roll. It was reassuring to learn from the Election Commission that the voter list will be prepared according to standard procedures followed prior to the previous elections. Let us say it categorically that the EC must not only take, but also must be seen to be taking all the steps that are needed to prepare a fool-proof, accurate and authentic electoral roll.

The EC clarifications mean that, as in the past, a four-tier personnel set-up will be employed in accomplishing the massive task. The officially designated persons to undertake the exercise ranging from house-to-house data collection through supervision and monitoring to double-checking and collation would be the enumerators, supervisors, assistant registration officers and finally registration officers. The enumerators are usually drawn from amongst teachers. They could be picked up from government and non-government sectors. It is important that they hold no political brief, are non-partisan and have been compulsorily trained up to be able to fit the bill.

We would also like to emphasise the role of political parties in making sure that every single voter is registered with the EC. If the parties cooperate and actively participate in keeping a constant vigil on the data collection process at the domiciliary level, there is no reason why any eligible voter will be left out of the list. We would also urge the local communities to take active interest in the process so that the whole electorate is put on the list.

The existence of a voter is perhaps the most easily verifiable thing in a society. Therefore, any attempts at interpolation or exclusion should be automatically ruled out if all concerned demonstrate collective as well as mutually reinforcing will to have all eligible voters enjoy the right to franchise.

DR. MAINUDDIN AHMED

SINCE April, 2005 the government has started a drive to control adulteration and unhygienic practices of food in food processing industries, market, hotels and restaurants. The public are terrified to find the poor, unhygienic, and sub-standard food contaminated with poisonous and harmful chemical substances and microorganisms and inappropriately processed. Little was done in the past to protect the consumers from adulteration, pathogenic microbial contamination, toxic substances such as pesticide and other contaminants in food. There was an obsolete Food Law from British time, and although updated long back, it was never practised seriously. Present government deserves thanks for taking serious action against the unhygienic production, processing and marketing of foods. We much appreciate also the bold steps taken by the BST and the law enforcing agencies particularly the courageous and uncompromising attitudes of the magistrates in penalising the perpetrators. Government and private

media such as the dailies and TV channels are taking appropriate actions in disseminating the results of the drives to the consumers. The drive has even crossed the political divide.

After all we are all consumers including food processors, marketers, restaurant and hotel owners and the staff members associated with them. A mass awareness has been created in all the tiers of the society from the cities and towns to the villages. The consumers are getting aware of their right to get nutritious, safe and hygienic food. Although there are some minor flaws like a picture in a daily of a dish of prepared food in a very well known restaurant in Gulshan showing the tails of prawns as cockroaches. For the greater benefits of the people, such minor mistakes should be ignored at this initial stage of drive. I myself, working for last four decades nationally and internationally in post harvest protection and preservation of food and technology transfer of them in commercial application, and my colleagues who are either in active service or retired, fully support the present monumental drive of the government in this food sector. As a

The 'great game' in its old turf



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

WHILE most of the world remains focussed on contemporary issues of both global and regional concern, especially the US' imperial thrust across the Middle East, important developments have been taking place in the vast swathe of seemingly wasteland in the wind-swept steppes of Central Asia. A spanking new powerplay seems to be underway in the region -- a powerplay reminiscent of the 'great game' of nineteenth century that locked the imperial powers of the day -- Britain and Czarist Russia -- in an intense struggle for the domination of its geo-political space. Today the turf is the same, the players remain more or less unchanged only with the objectives shifted from geo-political dominance to also the control of the region's resources. The Russian role in the game is now subdued and the Chinese look detached and nonchalant. But they are certainly not oblivious of the momentous developments taking place in their neighbourhood. What is, however, piquant to them is the advent of the Americans in the scene replacing the British in the game.

However, the changes did not come out of the blue. In the wake of

9/11, the situation in Central Asia underwent a sudden dramatic change. With the American fury having been ignited in the smouldering flames of Pentagon, President Bush was on warpath. Both Russia and China might have calculated that helping the US in its war on terror in Afghanistan would be a good idea because it wouldn't only bring an end to the much feared Taliban regime, it would also earn them largesse in one form or other as well as 'brownie' point with Bush which they could cash in later. Little could they know of

sian'sun'.

But the politico-strategic equation in Central Asia had already started showing the sign of undergoing profound metamorphosis in the region with the coming of the Americans in the name of fighting terrorism in Afghanistan. What started as the Americans merely obtaining 'base' facilities in Central Asian states to prosecute war in Afghanistan they were gradually lured by the region's rich energy resources. Irresistibly the Americans developed long-term interests in Central Asia's natural

back to their fold. Apart from its original five members Uzbekistan joined the SCO in 2001 while Mongolia, India, Pakistan and Iran were also accepted as observers.

By all reckoning SCO is likely to play an important role in charting the course of events in Central Asia. Although the SCO's primary aim is to promote the mutual trade and investment its most significant area of cooperation may however turn out to be energy. The leaders are already discussing implementation of major projects relating to the pipelines from

unprecedented experiment. As both Russia and China assert their role in determining the future shape of things in Central Asian region their cooperation experienced fresh boon with their realisation that the Bush administration, not satisfied only with the base facilities was now engaged in a concerted effort to bring about regime change in Central Asian states.

First it was the Rose revolution in Georgia that brought into power an avowedly pro-American government. Then it was Ukraine where the

Uzbek leader. In July last the Sino-Russian summit in Moscow provided the platform for a major policy pronouncement by their leaders. In a solemn declaration significantly called the 'World order in 21st century' the leaders of both the countries presidents Hu and Putin rejected "attempts to ignore objective processes of social developments of sovereign states and impose on them alien model of social and political system."

This was a categorical 'No' to all the Bush administration has been proclaiming as its goal in different part of the world. The stage having been set for a clear delineation of competing philosophies the SCO summit sometimes later came out with even tougher stance than before. The summit rejected "attempts at monopoly and domination in international affair." The Shanghai group called upon the US to set up a deadline for the withdrawal of its bases from the region now that the anti-terror campaign in Afghanistan has come to an end while affirming their resolve to fight the menace with their own forces.

It is not clear if the Americans would oblige but in the meantime Russia is welcomed back in her former republics and she has decided to come out more forcefully in defence of its interest in the region. As regard China her energy requirement is so great and growing so rapidly that it has no option but to enter into long-term arrangements with Russia and Central Asian republics to secure guaranteed oil and gas supply from the region.

By all appearance the region is in the throes of a violent clash between the powers concerned to safeguard the best of their interests.

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

PERSPECTIVES

The Sanghai group called upon the US to set up a deadline for the withdrawal of its bases from the region. It is not clear if the Americans would oblige but in the meantime Russia is welcomed back in her former republics and she has decided to come out more forcefully in defence of its interest in the region. As regard China her energy requirement is so great and growing so rapidly that it has no option but to enter into long-term arrangements with Russia and Central Asian republics to secure guaranteed oil and gas supply from the region. By all appearance the region is in the throes of a violent clash between the powers concerned to safeguard the best of their interests.

the blueprint for a long and rapidly expanding US presence in Central Asia -- drawn up by the neo-cons in Washington.

Earlier, in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union its constituent republics in Central Asia suddenly found their umbilical chord to Moscow severed. The local party chiefs of the Soviet period lost no time in declaring their republics independent, of course, with the acquiescence of Moscow which perhaps presumed that these republics in its backyard -- acquired through bloody military subjugation over the past centuries -- would continue to rotate around the Rus-

endowments and got engaged in a calibrated effort to bring about 'regime changes' for installing pliant governments to be dictated by them on what would happen to the resources lying buried under the arid surface of Central Asian steppes.

Neither Beijing nor Moscow could earlier sense this game plan. When they did, its first fallout was an inevitable coming together of China and Russia to face the impending menace. In this regard the first step was to transform the old talking shop known as 'Shanghai Five' into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). The initiative was meant for bringing the Central Asian states

Central Asia to China's Xinjiang province and another from Russia to China which have already aroused considerable interests in the US. There are also plans for auto-trains and motorways linking Europe and China.

It has some justifications when the SCO claims to have provided unique political opportunity and fundamentally new model of geographical integration for the small countries in the region. Embracing almost two third of mainland Eurasia and uniting countries with different civilisation, culture and economic system the SCO's magnitude of functioning and transregional status make it an

Orange revolution ended Moscow's influence in an area considered part of Russian heartland. Moscow also nervously watched its ally being drummed out of the capital in Kirghystan and an attempt being made to oust Uzbekistan's pro-Moscow leader Islam Karimov. The scale of dangers posed by American plan was no more unclear.

The power play intensified when at this stage Moscow stepped in and managed to salvage the situation in Kirghystan by engineering a compromise which kept power in the hands of its friends. Then defying the machinations of Washington it came out openly and strongly in support of the

Challenges for Bangladesh as a stable and developing country

M. HAFIZUDDIN KHAN

IF an answer to the question whether Bangladesh will continue to survive as a stable and developing state with ever increasing GDP and ever decreasing poverty in all its manifestations is sought it is very likely that the replies will be sharply divided on the line of political divide that has developed in the country -- a division which is the handiwork of our political leaders, without any contribution from the population at large. The party in power will claim that everything is moving in right direction, that the country is pulsating and humming with development activities mainly at their behest. The opposition will claim that the country is facing a nose-dive and it may not continue to remain as a viable state due to maladministration, bad governance, corruption, all wrong and unpatriotic policies adopted and being pursued by the government. Things have come to such a pass that there exists a big group within and beyond the borders of the country which opines that all the symptoms of a failed state are being clearly visible. Even some are feeling happy at the prospect of Bangladesh heading towards that end.

Recently I had the occasion to attend a colloquium where the World Bank Country Director circulated a quiz named South Asia Development Quiz containing 22 multiple choice questions on four South Asian Countries -- Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan. Quoting from the World Bank's own publications the answers were also provided by the Country Director herself. The answers are summarised below:

Bangladesh has the lowest income inequality (Gini index) and maternal mortality rate; has achieved fastest decrease in fertility in the whole world, not only in South Asia, by non-coercive means. It is the first and only country to have eliminated Polio; Bangladesh's military expenditure as a percentage of GDP is the lowest; its proportion of women in its labour force is the highest among the four. The country has achieved the fastest reduction in infant and child mortality not only among its three South

Asian neighbours but also among all the developing countries in the world. Infant mortality has been cut to half from 144 to 69 per 1000 live births. Public expenditure on education is 15.5 percent of total government expenditure that is the highest among the four South Asian countries. Also primary school enrollment in Bangladesh is almost 100 percent and it is one of the highest in the developing world. Bangladesh is the only country in South Asia that has never defaulted on any IPP contracts in the power sector. It has the highest rates of child immunisation, including measles (77%) and DPT (85%). During the 1990s, the incidence of poverty in India and Bangladesh

generous nullifying the effects of the achievements mentioned in the preceding paragraph. In the quiz, out of 22 questions there were four to which we find very negative replies. The first one is about control of corruption. Bangladesh ranks worst with -1.09, followed by Pakistan (-0.87), Nepal (-0.61) and India (-0.31). Secondly, in regard to 'public service effectiveness' Bangladesh ranks second lowest with -0.72, followed by Pakistan (-0.57) and India (-0.04). Nepal's score (-0.90). Thirdly, Bangladesh ranks lowest on Rule of Law indicator. The score is as follows: Bangladesh -0.86, Nepal -0.82, Pakistan -0.78 and India -0.09. Fourthly, from the point of view of regulatory

of the fact that we are a very corrupt country. On the one hand this all pervasive corruption is causing loss, pilferage and wastage of scarce national resources and on the other it is creating myriad problems including portraying a very negative image of the country seriously affecting FDI flow as well as flow of bilateral and multilateral aid. The irony is that none of the political parties is willing to admit existence of corruption, not to speak of admitting its ever-increasing trend, when it is in power. But the same party will vociferously claim prevalence of corruption when it will be in the opposition.

The government, presumably under donor pressure, has consti-

to be encouraging and the general perception is disappointing. The country can hardly afford to lose any more time for the ACC to be become operational.

Public Service Effectiveness: The reason for bad performance is not far to seek. State monopoly, scarcity and corruption are responsible for this unhappy situation. Some of the unbundling efforts of the government were met with trade union resistance with cascading effects. The trade unions have a tendency to show irresponsible behaviour due mainly to the fact that the political parties for narrow political gains constituting adherence to unethical norms pamper all the trade unions. Examples of

on the part of the regulatory authorities coupled with their inadequate capacity to operate effectively. The situation has been accentuated by political interference.

From the picture depicted above it is seen that despite Bangladesh's achieving tremendous success in a large number of areas for which she can be proud of (although these success stories are going unnoticed and unrecognised by the outside world, even by many within the country) her failures are of very serious nature so much so that the failures far outweigh and overshadow the successes. A country may not be able to achieve successes in all directions at a time simultaneously. What is important is whether the negative aspects are overwhelming and can lead to a situation that will be disastrous for a country. Corruption, public service ineffectiveness, unsatisfactory rule of law and low regulatory quality are ominous signs -- these outweigh the benefits of the achievements so far gained. The situation is all the more dangerous due to the fact that determined efforts -- visible, effective and transparent -- to arrest the downward slide are lacking. From that point of view the possibility of heading towards a catastrophe cannot be ruled out. Moreover the recent emergence of, and show of strength by, religious militant groups appear to be the last straw on the camel's back.

In the ultimate analysis these are all due to governance failure and it will be very unfortunate if things go wrong as is being apprehended by many. But none of the above problems is unmanageable and insurmountable. Commitment on the part of the political leadership for good governance is wanting which is making all the difference. A determined leadership with firm commitment uninfluenced by political consideration can still bring about the necessary changes in the situation. Things cannot be changed overnight but a good beginning with as much firmness as it deserves and a clear message that the government means business, can perhaps lay a foundation for reversing the trend.

M. Hafizuddin Khan is ex-Comptroller and Auditor General of Bangladesh

Commitment on the part of the political leadership for good governance is wanting which is making all the difference. A determined leadership with firm commitment uninfluenced by political consideration can still bring about the necessary changes in the situation. Things cannot be changed overnight but a good beginning with as much firmness as it deserves and a clear message that the government means business, can perhaps lay a foundation for reversing the trend.

declined by 1 percentage point per year -- a record exceeding that of most developing countries around the world. Over 95 percent of Bangladesh's population has access to bacteria-free safe drinking water that is also highest compared with her neighbours. Bangladesh distinguishes itself for being one of the three low-income countries (per capita income below US\$ 745) on track to achieve the child mortality reduction goal. The other two countries are Vietnam and Indonesia. The power tariffs are closer to cost recovery than India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal. Bangladesh's GDP grew by 4.8 percent per year (overall 60% increase), exceeded only by India where 6 percent growth occurred and the growth rate of Bangladesh was most consistent or, in other words, least volatile. India and Bangladesh belong to 10 most rapidly growing economies amongst 31 large developing countries having population greater than 20 million.

The success story, however, ends here. Now we look at the failures that are not only very grave but also damaging quality indicator also Bangladesh's rank is at the lowest with -1.15, followed by Nepal (-1.03), Pakistan (-0.60) and India (-0.59).

From the above it will be seen that the performances of Bangladesh in 18 areas have been the best for which a Bangladeshi can genuinely be proud of. But the country is looked down upon by many countries of the world as well as by the multilateral donor agencies because of the negative and worst performance in respect of the four areas as shown in the preceding paragraph. The answers to these four questions have marred everything overshadowing the commendable performances in other areas. Let us discuss these four sad commentaries one by one:

Control of Corruption: Corruption in Bangladesh is all-pervasive, rather one of the highest in the world as has been revealed in the repeated Corruption Perception Indices worked out by the Transparency International. Whether one agrees with TI's ranking of Bangladesh being the most corrupt country of the world or not, there cannot be any denying

tuted a statutory body. Anti-Corruption Commission, to combat corruption. But, unfortunately, the ACC is still a non-starter. It is yet to organise itself into a functioning body. Its rules and regulations are yet to be framed, manpower selected, logistics procured to become operational. The ACC has not got the necessary support from the government, it is alleged. The team is not a cohesive body often divided in their views and approach. The ACC is yet to show that it can bite and is capable of rising to the occasion. Its impact on corruption control effort is yet to be felt although a considerable period of time has already passed.

Perhaps, the greatest reason for failure to arrest corruption by the now-defunct Bureau of Anti-Corruption and its successor, the much-vaunted ACC, is the lack of commitment at the political leadership level of the Government. Corruption control effort was itself corruption ridden and politically interfered with. What will be the scenario under the changed circumstances is yet to be seen, but the outlook does not appear

promoting the interest of the labourers and workers at the cost of national interest by the political parties are many. This problem can be addressed only when the political parties will refrain from irresponsible and unethical behaviour. Moreover, lack of consensus among the political parties on major socio-economic and political institutions of the country is a serious hindrance to bring discipline in the trade union activities.

Rule of Law: Rule of Law is absent in the country. Here also bad governance and lack of commitment of the government are mainly responsible for almost non-existence of rule of law. Combined with these factors the weak and inefficient law and order machinery, politicisation of law enforcing authorities and judiciary are contributing towards creating a downward trend in the situation. Corruption in law enforcing machinery and judiciary is also a very big contributor to the ever-deteriorating law and order situation.

Regulatory Quality: Prevalence of very low regulatory quality can be attributed to the lack of commitment

very low regulatory quality can be attributed to the lack of commitment

very low regulatory quality can be attributed to the lack of commitment

very low regulatory quality can be attributed to the lack of commitment

OPINION

The drive against adulterated food should continue

knows very well that if only one organisation is taken in the Council it should be BCSIR. The other scientific organisation to be considered is the BAEC. It's Institute of Food and Radiation Biology has well equipped laboratory -- probably the only one in the country to determine toxic pesticide residues in food. May be they are ignored as even the Ministry dealing with science is not represented. The first department of food science and technology was established in Bangladesh Agriculture University in Mymensingh. This department and the BUET should not be ignored.

To express my feeling I should state that if I were an active scientist I would have been very upset concerning the formation of the Council without the representation of those actively involved in research and development and technology transfer in food safety, hygienic processing of and trade in food. My recommendation to the government is to make the Council as 'Policy Organ' with the representation of all the relevant ministries and organisations, including the Ministry dealing with science as envisaged in the Bill minus the DU departments.

Another scientific and technical committee should be formed representing all the relevant scientific organisations and the university departments as well as trade and consumer organisations. Its role will be to advice the Council on the technical and scientific aspects of food safety, food hygiene, and food processing and food trade. The other important task that the Committee could do is to advice on the implementation of Bangladesh Standards formulated by the BSTI and international standards -- particularly those of CAC, regional standards, especially of European Commission, USFDA and standards of other incoming products.

Worldwide open trade has exposed us to a large variety of processed food in our supermarkets in cities and towns. It will be a Herculean task from BSTI to standardise all. It itself incorporates or adopts international standards such as those of CAC as our own standard. This national committee could be a great help to BSTI besides the law enforcing agencies to oversee the standards of the incoming products. Before entry of a new product on

to the shelf of a supermarket BSTI should be confirmed that it was processed according to our national and international standards and the standard of the country of origin (if acceptable to BSTI). BSTI should consider that it is not making an unnecessary Technical Barrier to Trade (TBT). Our food exporters and importers are aware of the International Plant Protection Convention and International Phytosanitary Portal under FAO that support implementation of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement under WTO. The BSTI should carefully examine the product and ensure that the country is not going to be liable to WTO in creating unnecessary problem in TBT Agreement.

I have placed much emphasis on CAC. I feel that I should write few lines about this important international programme. It was established in 1963 by FAO and WHO to develop food standards, guidelines, and related texts such as Code of Practice under the Joint FAO/WHO Food Standard Programme. The main purpose of the Programme are protecting health of the consumers and ensuring fair

trade practices in food trade and promoting and coordinating all food standard works undertaken by the international, governmental and non-governmental organizations. When our food processing industries talk about ISO, quality control and HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point) -- a concept initially developed by the food microbiologists) we welcome their implementation and BSTI also recognises these actions as they take care of a large portion of the food quality and hygiene problems. However, as a consumer I should demand that BSTI Standards, CAC Standards or other recognised Standards have been followed before the processed food is placed on my table.

We as consumers demand that the current drive should continue. People are getting aware of the government's care of their health in providing them safe and hygienic food. The government and the NGOs have also taken some actions to create awareness among the masses. The role of media is well appreciated and recognised. More campaign should be launched aiming at food processing industries, hotels, restaurants, fast food joints, food

vendors, wholesale and retail markets as well as the consumers. Both audio and visual materials should be produced aiming each target group by the government and the NGOs. Why not ask the assistance of the international organisations such as FAO and WHO? In 1990s CAC Organised an event for food vendors in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Before I conclude I should again reiterate my recommendation for constituting a National Scientific and Technical Committee representing the leading institutions and organisations on food science and technology in the country for implementation of standards and advising the Council on technical aspects. For any aspects of food processing BSTI needs the support of BCSIR, and for the determination of pesticide residues, radiation, heavy metal and trace element contamination, BSTI needs the assistance of BAEC. They should not only be used in trouble shooting, but also a part of the overall advisory system.

Dr. Mainuddin Ahmed is former Director, Institute of Food and Radiation Biology, BAEC and Professional Staff Member, Food and Environmental Protection Section, FAO/IAEA.