

Education in Bangladesh: An illustration

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"Formulating laws to make primary education compulsory, introducing food-for-education initiatives for girl students and infrastructural development have meant more new schools, and higher teacher recruitment rates," he said.

But while there is little doubt that students are going to the school, questions remain over much they are actually learning and how useful their schooling will be in later life.

Researchers say it is gradually becoming evident that resolving this problem is key to the future success of the Bangladeshi education system.

differences in quality between them and urban schools are mounting. They warn that the consequences of such disparities could be far reaching.

To witness this threat I went to a number of public and private primary schools in the Rangpur and Sungamanj districts in the north-eastern area.

Most of the government primary schools do not have teaching materials in the classroom except a blackboard. In each school, the ratio of teachers to students is

can do general calculations. But their teachers paint a different picture, arguing that most students are not up to scratch because of the limitations of the educational system.

A reliable gauge of the quality of pupils can be provided when they cross the primary level and enter the secondary stage in class six. An assessment exam is taken at the beginning of the year in the class six. Most students who have finished class five do not do well in this exam.

Another reason for high drop-out rates after class five is because education at secondary level is not free, and in most cases it is not possible for poorer parents and guardians to bear the expense of books and pens.

The question of educational quality also raises its head in the higher education sector, especially when it comes to a few private universities.

Education minister Dr. M Osman Farruk says that one way of improving standards is to recruit trained teachers. He says the authorities will next year implement a project -- with the help of the Asian Development Bank -- which aims to produce more teacher trainers.

Many expert educationists vehemently oppose this policy, but Dr. Farruk insists that the quality of secondary level students will be improved by this initiative.

Although no-one doubts that Bangladesh's education system faces formidable challenges in the future, it has nevertheless made progress particularly when it comes to pupil numbers.

So the end of term report reads 'well done but could do better.'

Bangladesh Sanglap 4: Education: Can The System Deliver Quality? will be broadcast today at 8pm after the BBC's Bengali Programme Proba in Shortwave meter band of 31 and 41 (at 9395 and 7520 KHz) and in Dhaka at FM 100 MHz. It will be televised in Channel 1 television on Sunday at 8 pm. The Daily Star is the BBC's print media partner for this programme.

The US can out-charm China



FAREED ZAKARIA writes from Washington

China has used soft power only in the sense that it has exercised its power softly. It does this consciously to show that it is not a bully, unlike guess who. And it works. America remains unpopular among the peoples of Asia, even in countries like Japan, where the government is friendly with Washington.

its urgency. "It's so clear that we were right; most Americans now see this, so why rub it in?" says Karim Raslan, a Malaysian writer and political consultant. American aid and rescue efforts after the tsunami helped mend its image, particularly in Indonesia. But the broadest reason for the shift is that Asian countries are beginning to see China's rise as the complex phenomenon that it is.

The East Asia Summit, being hosted in Kuala Lumpur on December 12, should serve as a wake-up call for Washington. While we focus our attention daily on Iraq and the Gaza Strip, the 21st century is going to be shaped in Asia. Already India and China make up 40 percent of the world's working-age population. In 20 years, it is likely that three of the world's four biggest economies will be in Asia.

Asia already has many suns. After all, in real GDP, Japan's economy is much larger than China's.

India, despite its political inertia, continues to grow at close to 8 percent. Asian unity is a nice idea but not likely to be much more than that. The more Asians think about it, the less they want any one country to be their leader. Nor has any Asian country shown the ability to do this.

China's troubles were highlighted recently in its spectacularly unsuccessful bid for a permanent seat at the UN Security Council. Despite spending billions a year in foreign aid and being the second largest donor to the UN, Japan got almost no support in Asia for its effort.

spent very little money and actually has not been particularly charming. Instead, it has dazzled everyone with visions of its future economic might and the opportunities this would bring.

But neither Japan nor China has any real vision of what Asia should look like, certainly not a vision other countries will buy into. Simon Tay, a Singaporean scholar, explains, "People speak of China's 'soft power.' But this is a misunderstanding of the term, coined by Joseph Nye. Soft power means the appeal of one's culture, ideas, and principles. China has no soft power. No one in Asia wants the Chinese dream or pines to live in a Chinese world. Even the Chinese don't really know what that would mean."

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In most Asia elections in the last two years, being pro-American was a political liability. "Many would welcome an American role. But not one that tries to be the dominant power itself or simply balances China," says Tay. "We want an honest broker. But we don't see that, so we are searching for some kind of self-regulation at summits like this upcoming one."

There is a growing market for a long-term American role in Asia. But is there someone in Washington who knows how to make the sale?

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The biggest progress made in Bangladesh's education sector over the last two decades is the huge increase of school-going pupils at the primary level. Even in remote villages, it is hard to find a child who has never been to a school.

Education minister Dr. M Osman Farruk says that one way of improving standards is to recruit trained teachers. He says the authorities will next year implement a project -- with the help of the Asian Development Bank -- which aims to produce more teacher trainers. Many expert educationists vehemently oppose this policy, but Dr. Farruk insists that the quality of secondary level students will be improved by this initiative.

becoming evident that resolving this problem is key to the future success of the Bangladeshi education system. The findings of a recent survey seem to confirm their argument.

The Education Watch research revealed that in 1998 only 29 percent of students at primary achieved the principal competencies such as writing, reading, and general mathematical skills.

Another survey carried out in 2001 revealed that only 1.6 percent of pupils reached the required standard in 27 competencies.

Researchers argue that their findings show that the increase of pupils at primary level has resulted in a corresponding downfall in quality.

The survey shows that these deficiencies are more evident in rural primary schools, and that

huge, with many finding that the only way to tackle the imbalance is by running two shifts.

Sutopa Bhattachariya is a teacher of Rothpara primary school of Sunamganj.

"As the number of students is too high," she says, "we cannot give attention to all of the students. We also cannot teach properly as we have to take classes continuously. The class hours have been shortened. They are not longer than 30-40 minutes."

"Lack of awareness among parents and guardians also exists, as most do not teach their children at home," she says.

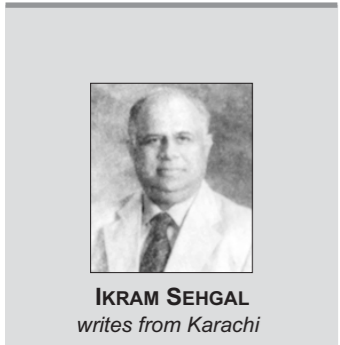
Talking with students I found many, quite understandably, as not in a position to assess the quality of the education they are receiving. If asked, they say they can read anything in Bengali or English, and

Gul Ahmed, the headmaster of Vimkhali Government High School in Sunamganj, says that the deficiencies of students in subjects such as English and Maths is frustrating. Three-quarters of pupils enrolling in the class six cannot differentiate between point five and point zero five.

"Because there is no exam to enter the secondary stage from class five, students who don't know the alphabet get admitted," said Gul Ahmed. Yet schools in rural areas have no choice but to admit these inadequate pupils in the interests of maintaining pupil numbers.

Another problem at the primary level is the high drop-out rate of students from or before class five. Rasheda K Choudhury says this is mainly due to the poverty, as par-

India shining?



IKRAM SEHGAL writes from Karachi

"housing starts" as sound economic indicators, mobiles in the hands of nearly everyone is not an accurate measure of economic prosperity. With two million or so mobile sets activated in India every month, over 24 million this year alone, a total of about 80 million mobile sets in the country represents 8 percent of the population. By the same token over 16 million mobile telephones make 10 per-

cent of the population in Pakistan. By the same token what about Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal? Mobiles give a false dawn of economic dynamism. All this hoopla cannot hide the tell-tale signs of poverty that drove BJP from power despite the perception of affluence. More than double the population at the time of independence in 1947 live under the poverty line and the numbers are growing. About 300 million are considered middle class but the real figure of upper middle class is probably about 150 million, about 15 percent of the population.

rest of the South Asian countries combined. But compare the international image of Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, or Bangladesh as regards "law and order" to that of India.

The "secular" state notwithstanding, the 16 percent Muslim population and the 8-9 percent Christian community are virtually not represented in the rich class. The Buddhists do not fare any better, the minorities are nowhere, as if due to discrimination it is certainly because of lack of opportunities available to them.

AS I SEE IT Indian Economic Summit is certainly good for Indians. One can understand why economically dynamic India is reluctant to sacrifice the name change to South Asian Economic Summit but an economically integrated South Asia will require a fundamental attitude changeover, the others should not feel like extras in a movie set. The Indians are the centre of the South Asian world, but they will have to be more large-hearted towards their neighbours to get genuine cooperation going in the region.

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a down payment of Rs 0.5 million) even if he or she were to put away a third of his/her monthly salary in the face of booming real-estate prices.

The Indians create a very realistic illusion while we in Pakistan love to run down ourselves to the lowest rung of the economic ladder. The way to keep land prices down is to have a non-utilisation fee on price of land, this will contain speculation. The Pakistan middle class is probably better off than the Indian upper-middle class, even though the Indian rich are far richer (and getting richer) than the Pakistani rich and are far more in number. An Indian friend of mine did an IPO of his company of Rs 700 million recently, it is now worth Rs 16,000 million. The downside of "trickle-down" economics is common to India and Pakistan, indeed all the developing countries of the world, the lot of the masses cannot be tackled without first creating manufacturing and services dynamism through private entrepreneurship, thus making the rich richer and putting additional burden on the lower middle class and poor. The name of the game is not to beggar the vast majority during the process. On a pro-rata basis, the number of insurrections and incidents of armed violence in India is more then double the rate in the

rest of the South Asian countries combined. But compare the international image of Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, or Bangladesh as regards "law and order" to that of India. The "secular" state notwithstanding, the 16 percent Muslim population and the 8-9 percent Christian community are virtually not represented in the rich class. The Buddhists do not fare any better, the minorities are nowhere, as if due to discrimination it is certainly because of lack of opportunities available to them. The signs of economic dynamism in India instills a bad case of economic inferiority among non-Indian South Asians. Individual Indians are extremely nice and hospitable, as a group they tend to be condescending towards other South Asians. The Indian attitude does create a doubt in the minds of those from smaller countries, they fear becoming second class citizens in an Indian-dominated South Asia. South Asians therefore tend to be ambivalent towards Indians, tending to be resentful of them as a country. The prosperity and development in India of today is very real, when thrust down your throat ad nauseam from every pulpit, it does get suffocating.

India is certainly on the go, Indians have reason to consider the country "shining" but the shine is like the gloss on a new cricket ball. After a few overs have been bowled the rough edges do creep through. And one's inferiority complex straightens itself out when passing through the antiquated and cumbersome procedures at India's international airports. The personnel are surly and unfriendly, or is this only reserved for Pakistanis? Sri Lankans and Bangladeshis say that they get "the treatment" more than us. In such an environment, an Indian Economic Summit is certainly good for Indians. One can understand why economically dynamic India is reluctant to sacrifice the name change to South Asian Economic Summit but an economically integrated South Asia will require a fundamental attitude changeover, the others should not feel like extras in a movie set. The Indians are the centre of the South Asian world, but they will have to be more large-hearted towards their neighbours to get genuine cooperation going in the region.

Ikram Sehgal, a former Major of Pakistan Army, is a political analyst and columnist.

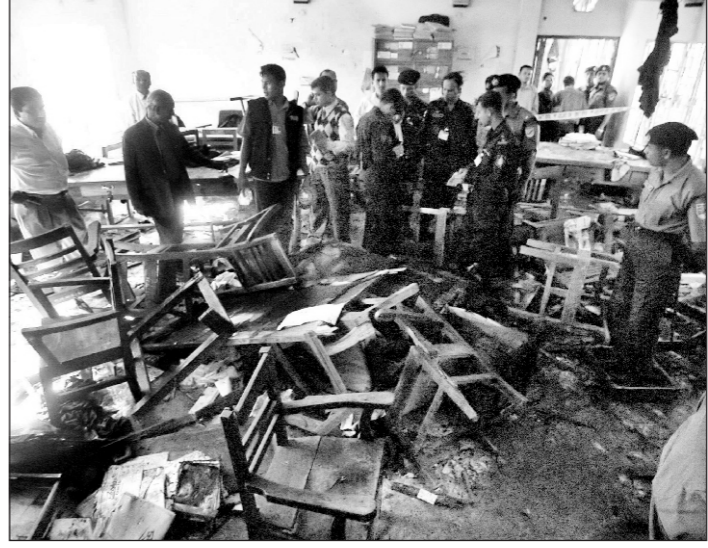
Bomb blasts and security loopholes

Exploding bombs in 63 out of 64 districts anything short of waging war against the state? Any least-oriented person on statecraft would agree to this observation. The extent, scale and gravity of August 17 serial blasts warrant all-out effort, on part of a state, for eradicating the roots of this danger.

The bombers also left leaflets at the explosion sites, saying that these blasts, all at a time, were just to prove their strength. Did they try to implicate that they were capable of a takeover? If that was the case, what can be a more demeaning for those steering the state machinery? However, some stray security measures were taken with some arrests, the reaction of the ruling elite to these blasts was more flippant than anxious. Imagine what would have been the reaction of, say, India or Pakistan, not to talk about a few developed countries? What would have they done if bomb exploded in all their provinces or districts? It should be anybody's guess: they would have used all their might to uproot the bombers within the soonest possible time.

On the contrary, Bangladesh seems to take unusually long time, trying to pass on the buck to the scourge of international terrorism. Considerable time has passed after August 17; the militants allegedly responsible for the incidents continued with their mission and as part of it, killed two judges. Besides, members of suicide squad of bomb-happy outfit have again struck amid a threatening spree. Suicide attacks, Bangladesh's first, on November 29, at two court premises followed by another a couple of days later have left quite a number of persons dead. These seemed to have moved the administration for taking some measures. But, measures so far, according to press reports, among others, that have been taken by the government are: a. increasing the number of security personnel; b. starting to make sure that its secret service agencies deliver; c. engaging members of Rapid Action Battalion and police to arrest militants. While these measures are welcome by members of the public, there are still some security loopholes that may overshadow all these efforts. Confused public: Ever since the blasts began to plague

Bangladesh is a geographically small nation-state. Formulating a national security strategy for it should not be too difficult. The present situation certainly demands a long-term security plan against terror and violence. Security, these days, means peace in citizens' minds; and the present crisis calls for an all-out effort to contain terror for the sake of peace.



Suicide bomber attack at Gazipur court premises on Nov 29 killed at least six persons.

Bangladesh, political parties have been accusing each other for these incidents. The opposition parties have been blaming the government party and its allies to these blasts and the rise of militancy. A few Islamic parties have identified Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh as behind the blasts. One or two members of the government party have also pointed their fingers at Jamaat. The opposition parties have continued their tall-talks without playing any role to encounter the scourge. On the top of everything, the government has been saying that "a section" was trying to create chaos in the country, without explaining who "a section" really is. Now, as blames and counter-blames may sound irritating, they are also making the public highly insecure. Why? Because these are likely to plunge the people into utter confusion. Here lies the strategic flaws on the part of a nation. If political parties themselves play a catalytic role in making the public confused, there's no meaning talking about security for them. A confused mass is not an easy bunch to lead. "Visible" patrolling: Bomb inci-

dents of August 17 scale usually require "highly visible" security patrolling to prevent them. While the government says it has taken all measures to prevent bombers from manufacturing, carrying and exploding bombs, very little has been done to ensure that. Anyone touring Dhaka city would see the lack of "visible" security patrol. It is only the TV news bulletins that are showing visuals of security checks. In reality, security personnel deployed in Dhaka hardly do any vigorous check they are supposed to. Without any "visible" security, we may not be able to deter the bombers.

Who and what: Are our intelligence agencies proving to be ineffective? If they could deliver, incidents such as August 21 and August 17 wouldn't have occurred in the first place. Our police and the elite force, RAB, were seen to arrest a few alleged militants and uncover some tiny bomb-making ghettos, recovering some bomb-making substances. But do they have any idea where the amount of explosives used on August 17 came from? Absolutely no clue on it! Do they find it hard to believe

that these militants are "capable" of running big terrorist attacks? It seems they are yet to realise intensity of their (militants') firepower. And with suicide attackers now in the scene, wouldn't it be close to impossible for these security forces to tackle the situation?

Again, "what" actually are we looking for? Are we looking for firearms or explosives? The present situation certainly warrants looking for explosives. But the way our security forces are handling explosives is a matter of grave concern. They are seen handling bombs without any protection. On the other hand, militants seem to be more experienced with explosives that our security officials are.

Armed forces: The gravity of the August 17 countrywide serial blasts followed by recent incidents suggests that an all-out action needs to be in place. Any other country would have waged a war against the militants immediately after the attacks. And the best way to fight them might be using our armed forces. The implication of August 17 was that it was an attack on our sovereignty. And when the country's sovereignty is at stake, the armed forces have to be brought in. Well, the government may have reasons for not to call them in, but they can at least plug the holes through which illegal weapons and/or explosives enter into the country. We do have some members of our armed forces in RAB, but they don't seem enough. Their number needs to be increased. If the armed forces can be used in other parts of the world for keeping peace, they can also be used for the same purpose in their own country.

Conclusion: Bangladesh is a geographically small nation-state. Formulating a national security strategy for it should not be too difficult. The present situation certainly demands a long-term security plan against terror and violence. Our national policymakers must have seen that the concept of security has witnessed a sea-change at the global level. Side by side with macro issues of security, the micro issues, such as theoretical and technological know-how of security personnel, are also getting high priority. Security, these days, means peace in citizens' minds; and the present crisis calls for an all-out effort to contain terror for the sake of peace. Ekram Kabir, a Dhaka-based journalist, works for the BBC.