

## No more lip service to poverty

*All out effort needed to alleviate it*

**P**OVERTY as an agenda receives seasonal attention at best. It seldom occupies the centre stage of national discourses. Poverty alleviation would figure either during election time or in the budget making season. Even the political party manifestoes are not sharply focused on poverty reduction except for making promises in broad generalisations.

It perhaps, therefore, remains for in-depth studies by professional groups to highlight the actual state of poverty in terms of extreme income deficiencies and appalling nutritional status from time to time. That's how we come by a study styled "The State of Poorest 2005-2006 - Chronic Poverty in Bangladesh" done jointly by Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) and Chronic Poverty Research Centre (CPRC) of UK.

The revelations ought to jolt us into a new realisation that despite the GDP growth rate being steady at 5.5 percent per annum for some years now, no significant dent has been made in the hardcore poverty situation. About 24 percent of the total population currently live in extreme poverty with 19 percent of the rural households going without three meals a day and 10 percent subsisting on two meals or less for a number of months every year.

What is alarming to our mind, the policies remain 'anti-poorest'; in fact, the absolute poor are virtually kept out of the budgetary or planning frameworks, or at best keep receiving marginal attention. Quality of growth is as important as its quantity. And this is where we are lacking in; for, although the growth figure has been moderately impressive and we have come out of the shadow of famine, the income gap between the rich and the poor has yawned with the rich getting richer and the poor poorer.

Reform of the tax system can help usher in egalitarian distribution of wealth. First, it will help curb inequalities in income; and secondly, make available public finance to invest in poverty reduction projects for the poorest.

The public and private sector need to work in hand in hand in extending necessary infrastructure support to the rural and urban areas. Access to finance and market linkages can give a tremendous fillip to income generation. There has been a surge in self-employment ventures and this must be carried forward by way of encouraging non-conventional and innovative approaches to poverty eradication. But, for all this to happen in ideal proportions, we need to elevate poverty on to the centre stage of our national agenda.

## Judicial inquiry to serve cause of justice

*Attack on shooters barbaric*

**I**T is welcome news that a Dhaka court has ordered judicial probe into the incident in which some top shooters of the country, including the Commonwealth Games Gold medalist Asif Hossain Khan, were assaulted by the police.

There is, of course, no way to take this kind of police excess lightly. The incident took place on October 2 and the ace shooter of the country is now struggling to recover from the injuries inflicted upon him. Asif is likely to miss the next Asian games as doctors have said that he might require further treatment abroad. It is hard to accept that the brilliant shooter could miss an important event because of demonic treatment meted out to him by the police. There has already been a deluge of protests, particularly from the sportsmen's community. They have every reason to feel threatened by the unprecedented attack on the shooters.

Now, the question is how precisely society should set about the task of preventing such police action on innocent people. The state minister for home affairs did not go beyond expressing his sorrow, after the shooters came under attack. An outright condemnation or a resolve to punish the offenders was not forthcoming -- a sign of the administration being not tough enough to do justice to the aggrieved. That's surely not what people were expecting from the men at the helm.

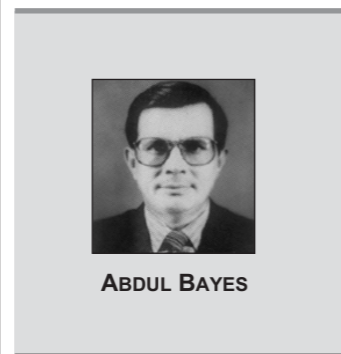
What people are expecting, instead, is that the law would take its natural course, unhindered by any extraneous factors.

People are shocked by the law enforcers' tendency to apply force on citizens as though they are pitted against them. Numerous examples can be cited to prove the point. They are enjoying a kind of immunity not compatible with our democratic credentials.

The problem with letting the attackers go unpunished is that they might begin to believe that they can get away with all their misdeeds.

The culprits have to be brought to justice not only because they committed a punishable offence but also to convince people that the existing judicial system is capable of dealing with all violators of the law regardless of their positions.

## On judges and judgments



ABDUL BAYES

**J**USTICE KM Hasan is the talk of the town nowadays. Justice Hasan is supposed to head the next caretaker government for a neutral, free, and fair election to be held in January 2007. This is what his predecessors, Justices Shahabuddin Ahmed and Habibur Rahman, had to do. Justice Latifur Rahman, who was also head of the CTG, became controversial because of his stay in a government house for a much longer period than stipulated. It has been alleged that the extension of his stay was possible because of his "heroic role" during the 2001 election which brought the 4-party alliance into power with two-thirds majority in the Parliament. But, by and large, caretaker governments of the past performed more or less credibly. There could be no questions raised, ex ante, as none of them could be alleged to have

### BENEATH THE SURFACE

Taking all this into consideration, we expect that Justice KM Hasan would gift the nation with a way out of the current political impasse by not taking over as caretaker chief. It is up to Justice Hasan to step down or not. But suffice it to say, his rejection might raise his esteem in the public mind more than his acceptance. We do expect good judgment from justices. Although Justice MA Aziz and others have so far frustrated us miserably by their deeds, we are still looking forward to a fine morning.

worn political caps beforehand. Now the problem looms large in the wake of Hasan's appointment. The 14-party alliance has already aired its negative attitude against him, not in words alone, but also by threatening Dhaka-siege programs the moment he takes over. So, unlike those in the past, a smooth transfer of power to a caretaker government is faced with, possibly, an insurmountable resistance. Probably, this will not delay the election even for a while. But are the allegations brought against the next caretaker chief -- e.g. his being a party man who was gifted with an extension as a favour -- borne out by facts? Law Minister Moudud Ahmed is reported to be repeatedly saying that everyone of us votes for some party. Therefore, according to him, really neutral persons are had to find. The fact that everyone casts a vote for a particular party does not go

against the neutrality of the person concerned. The most important planks of neutrality, in this case, are: (a) he/she should not have (or had) any membership of any political party contesting for the election, and (b) he/she should not be gifted with any privilege unavailable for others. The allegation that Justice Hasan was an activist of BNP -- the international secretary of the party -- has never been rejected, either by BNP or by Justice Hasan himself. We, therefore, tend to smell some truth in it. His appointment as an ambassador to Iraq during BNP rule has also not been contested so far. The issue surrounding the fact that the age limit of the chief justice was extended by the government during Justice Hasan's tenure as chief justice has also not been clarified by the vested quarters. Fuel to the fire of the on-going movement was also added by

Justice Hasan himself. Recently, he visited a shrine at Comilla, allegedly accompanied by BNP stalwarts. One is the present VC of Dhaka University who is known to be close to BNP politics. The other was the local aspirant for a ticket from BNP. It is not an allegation by the opposition, but an item in almost all newspapers. Of course, I never suspected that Mr. Hasan had them with him adventurously. But, I am sorry that I suspect his wisdom and judgment in allowing them to be with him on that occasion. Let me straighten the statement: a man of his stature (Justice Hasan) should have well understood that a visit to the shrine with political loyalists might add fuel to the on-going fire. It might bring into question his credibility as a caretaker chief. Therefore, by all indicators, the future caretaker chief could be rightly criticized for not being a neutral man.

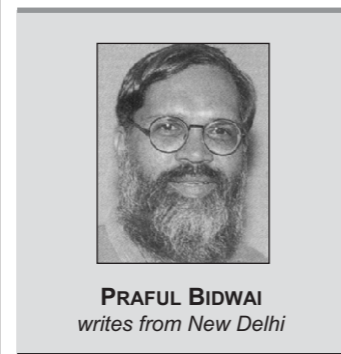
In our universities there is a rule that, before one is asked to set or examine a course, one has to declare that none of the examinees are one's close relatives. Examining scripts of, or setting questions for, relatives are taken as serious offences. We can apply the same logic here also. Justice KM Hasan knows it quite well that he was once an activist of the ruling BNP party, an ambassador during that party's term in power, and got a special privilege (only for him) during the tenure of this government. Should his conscience dictate him to take over as a "neutral" person? If I were wearing his shoes I would have declined for the sake of the nation's democracy. The logic of constitutional continuity -- wrongly interpreted sometimes -- does not always provide credibility. The February 15 election in 1996 was also termed as a logical continuity of the constitution. But the world never recognized that election. The argument that 1996 and 2006 are not the same is also not tenable. In 1996, we had no Kansat and Phulbari episodes, where the full government machinery bowed down to a local upsurge. Nor was there any incident of Shanir Akhra variety, where a ruling party lawmaker had to run for shelter from the people's fury. In 1996, people did

not come out of their houses at midnight protesting shortage of electricity. Remember, all these are merely for access to regular supply of electricity and preservation of national wealth. The elections would, probably, create more havoc than we can think of. And finally, in 1996, Bangladesh was not the corrupt country for a consecutive run of five years, and the incidents of terrorism, extortion, and syndicate business to suck people's blood were not as pervasive as they are now. All these have accumulated, over the years, in peoples' minds. Taking all this into consideration, we expect that Justice KM Hasan would gift the nation with a way out of the current political impasse by not taking over as caretaker chief. It is up to Justice Hasan to step down or not. But suffice it to say, his rejection might raise his esteem in the public mind more than his acceptance. We do expect good judgment from justices. Although Justice MA Aziz and others have so far frustrated us miserably by their deeds, we are still looking forward to a fine morning.

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## Of tall claims and white lies

*Dealing with Musharraf*



PRAFUL BIDWAI  
writes from New Delhi

**T**HE tsunami of publicity around Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf's book hit India, too. *In the Line of Fire*, and responses to it, claimed 378 prime-time minutes on Hindi-language channels between September 21 and 28. Dr Manmohan Singh received only 114 minutes. The book has attracted exceptional notice because of its boastful and controversial claims. Its true content is conveyed more eloquently by the 16-page folio of photographs than by the 352 pages-long text. The folio's first three pictures concern the December 2003 attempt on the General's life -- his self-depiction as a victim of terrorism, and a reliable ally in the US-led "Global War on Terrorism" (GWOT). Then follows a short career and family album. After that, it's all politics. This montage is calculated to refute former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's claim that he wasn't informed of the preparations for Kargil. It also depicts Gen Musharraf as a leader of world

Gen Musharraf depicts a false consistency in Pakistan's approach towards the Taliban. He justifies Pakistan's original support for the Taliban. Even after they unleashed a reign of terror the support continued, "for geo-strategic reasons. If we had broken with them, that would have created a [power vacuum] ... into which might have stepped the Northern Alliance ... supported by Russia, India, and Iran." Gen Musharraf just won't admit that Pakistan was disastrously wrong to create this monster in the first place. Nor does he show the slightest awareness of the evil and immoral nature of Taliban-style terrorism.

stature meeting President George W Bush (both men in open collars, with their wives, signifying bonhomie), Mr Vajpayee, Dr Singh, and others. Of the 32 post-coup pictures, Gen Musharraf appears in uniform in only five. Gen Musharraf is telling his two audiences -- mainly Western, and secondarily, domestic -- that he's a reliable moderate who saved Pakistan from disaster, and the world from more Taliban-al-Qaeda violence. He's indispensable. As he told BBC Radio: "You will be brought down to your knees if Pakistan doesn't cooperate with you. If the ISI is not with you, you will fail." Domestically, he promotes himself as conventional hardcore nationalist. The book's composition reflects Gen Musharraf's priorities. "The War on Terror" part occupies 82 pages, while the Kargil chapter is only 12 pages long. The text totally hides Musharraf's identity as a general. Gen Musharraf has been criticised by his colleagues, including former classmate Lt Gen Ali Kuli Khan and former foreign minister

Sartaj Aziz, for lying about Kargil. Kargil was no "victory." Pakistan had to vacate seized territory. It lost hundreds of men. Why did Gen Musharraf make the fateful decision in 2001 to dump al-Qaeda-Taliban? He won't admit he was arm-twisted through Mr Bush's "you-are-with-us-or-you-are-against-us" ultimatum. Nobody has corroborated his statement that Mr Richard Armitage told the ISI chief that Pakistan would be bombed "back to the Stone Age" if it doesn't join GWOT. Gen Musharraf says the decision had "nothing to do" with threats. "I made a dispassionate, military-style analysis of our options ... My decision was based on the well-being of my people ... I war-gamed the US as an adversary ... can we confront them and withstand the onslaught? The answer was no." Besides, India would exploit the situation to make the Kashmir status quo permanent. "The security of our strategic assets [read, nuclear weapons] would be jeopardised." His "analysis" rationalises

Pakistan's capitulation to US pressure. Gen Musharraf blames India for the Agra summit's failure. The charge isn't false. India withdrew an agreed joint statement at the last minute because Mr LK Advani objected to it. However, Gen Musharraf doesn't say why he came to Agra, and what he expected. After all, he had decided not to salute Mr Vajpayee in Lahore, in February 1999. He was also Kargil's architect. He doesn't disclose what persuaded him to meet Mr Vajpayee in 2004, and start the dialogue process. Gen Musharraf depicts a false consistency in Pakistan's approach towards the Taliban. He justifies Pakistan's original support for the Taliban. Even after they unleashed a reign of terror the support continued, "for geo-strategic reasons. If we had broken with them, that would have created a [power vacuum] ... into which might have stepped the Northern Alliance ... supported by Russia, India, and Iran." Gen Musharraf just won't admit

that Pakistan was disastrously wrong to create this monster in the first place. Nor does he show the slightest awareness of the evil and immoral nature of Taliban-style terrorism. The general's hype and bragging have a definite purpose. For instance, the "bombing-back-to-Stone-Age" claim reminds Mr Bush of the assurances given to Gen Musharraf in 2001 for joining GWOT, including US help in getting India to discuss Kashmir. Similarly, Gen Musharraf's Kargil story is meant to expand his domestic constituency by stressing his anti-India credentials. While talking of Mr Sharif's attempt to prevent his plane from landing in Pakistan during the 1999 coup, he describes India as an "enemy" country. Gen Musharraf is also guilty of self-delusion. He claims he's more genuinely democratic than the civilians who ruled Pakistan. Similarly, he says most "emphatically," that progress in the bilateral dialogue "is owed considerably to the Kargil conflict." This takes one's breath away. It was only after India and Pakistan put Kargil's bitter legacy behind them that their relations thawed. Such "khaki" fantasies about the effectiveness of force are dangerous. Gen Musharraf probably doesn't believe all this. He has shown remarkable openness in dealing with India since 2004. He has negotiated CBMs with sincerity and stopped harping upon Kashmir. Yet, the book rubs many people up the wrong way and

makes controversial claims. That's why it's seen as unhelpful to the India-Pakistan dialogue. Some hawks have declared Gen Musharraf as unreliable. The book wasn't written to promote the dialogue process. It has negative and unpleasant features. They reveal a complex, troubled, military personality dealing with fraught situations in a country beset by multiple crises, including a crisis of identity. Gen Musharraf is no serious, deep analyst. However, that's no reason why the world should stop pushing him towards moderation, which the book seriously endorses. There's even less reason why India should understate the bilateral dialogue process. India must recognise the contribution the process has made, and build on it. It is far superior to working through Washington. Even if a strong India-US strategic partnership emerges, the US won't abandon Pakistan, or force it to do India's bidding. India must evolve a long-term policy towards Pakistan, which looks towards real democracy. But India has to deal with Gen Musharraf so long as he's there.

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## Sordid commentary on 8th parliament



ANM NURUL HAQUE

**T**HE curtain has dropped down on the 8th parliament on October 4 after the holding of 23 sessions in 373 working days in the last five years. The final day's sitting, however, ended amid valedictory speeches of the leader of the house, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, and leader of the opposition and AL president, Sheikh Hasina, over the effectiveness of the house. The 8th parliament that began on October 28, 2001 passed 185 laws during its full tenure. It also disposed of 10,707 notices under Section 71 of the Rules of Procedure and brought an amendment to the Article 65(3) of the Constitution to elect 45 women lawmakers to reserved seats in place of the earlier 30. Considering all these

### BY THE NUMBERS

The TIB report on the functioning, or rather malfunctioning, of the 8th parliament revealed that a total amount of Tk 2.35 crore was wasted in three (4th, 5th, and 6th) sessions, and Tk 2.91 crore was wasted in five (15th to 19th) sessions of the 8th parliament due to quorum crisis. The amount was computed on the basis of an expense of Tk 15,000 per minute for running a session. The aggregated waste due to quorum crisis in all the 23 sessions of the 8th parliament may be around Tk 20 crore.

things, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has termed the 8th parliament "a milestone" for democracy. Some important bills passed in the 8th parliament are the Speedy Trial Tribunal Act 2002, Gram Sarkar Act 2003, Constitution (Fourteenth Amendment) Law 2004, Anti-Corruption Commission Law 2004, Jatiya Sangsad (Reserved Women Seats) Election Law 2004, Bangladesh Pure Food (Amendment) Bill 2005, the Tax Ombudsman Act 2005, Copyrights (Amendment) Act 2005, and Public Procurement Act 2006. The Tele-lapping Law and Bangladesh Labour Law 2006 were made against the interests of the people at large. The leader of the opposition,

Sheikh Hasina, in her winding-up speech, labeled the 8th parliament as a failure that has frustrated the people. "We submitted 2,511 notices for holding discussions on different public problems, but none of our notices were accepted for discussion," said Hasina. The Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) released a sensational report on the 8th parliament a few months back saying that the present parliament had failed to ensure the accountability of the government, and the parliamentary standing committees on different ministries had also failed to investigate corruption and irregularities in different organizations under the ministries concerned. The report also criticized

excessive boycotts and walkouts from the House by the opposition MPs. In his concluding speech the Speaker, who was badly criticized for his partisan role, defended the parliamentary committees saying that they had worked tirelessly to ensure accountability and transparency of the government activities. But the reality, as reported in the survey report of the TIB that keeps tab on the workings of parliaments in emerging democracies, however, is sadly different. The TIB report on the functioning, or rather malfunctioning, of the 8th parliament revealed that a total amount of Tk 2.35 crore was wasted in three (4th, 5th, and 6th) sessions, and Tk 2.91 crore was wasted in five (15th to 19th) sessions of the 8th parliament due to quorum crisis. The amount was

computed on the basis of an expense of Tk 15,000 per minute for running a session. The aggregated waste due to quorum crisis in all the 23 sessions of the 8th parliament may be around Tk 20 crore. The time lost in quorum failure amounted to 26.15 hours of the total (4th, 5th, and 6th) session time of 127.50 hours, and 32.23 hours of total (15th to 19th) session time of 184 hours. Only 22 hours were spent on legislative business in the 4th, 5th, and 6th sessions. Interestingly, the MPs uttered the names of their party leaders at least 493 times during their deliberations in the 4th, 5th, and 6th sessions, and 146 times in the budget session of 2005. Such a report on our parliament has created a deep sense of concern among the patriotic citizens of the country. The speaker, on the concluding day, has declared the names of 21 MPs, who attended the maximum number of the 373 workdays in the 23 sessions, for rewarding them to encourage others to attend the house. This is quite a silly invention of the speaker which is being practiced in the schools among the tiny tots. Neither the leader of the house, Khaleda Zia, nor the leader of the opposition, Sheikh Hasina, can get this reward as

Khaleda attended on 195 of the 373 workdays while Hasina attended on less than 50 workdays. The nation expects enactment of a law to castigate the MPs for their recurring absence in the house, instead of rewarding them. The nation witnessed so many sordid dramas in the 8th parliament, turning it into a venue for character assassination and tainting its sublimity. Sometimes it even turned into an exclusive club of the downfallen. Such a state is a clear reflection of the quality of the politics and leadership we are burdened with. Indeed, the nation is greatly frustrated with this sort of people occupying an august body meant for deliberation. A paramount truth that we cannot afford to brush away is that there is a need to change the political culture foisted on us. This is mainly because politics is fast becoming a profitable business, and the nexus between politics and criminality is corroding the democratic character of the polity. This sort of people, or others of their ilk, would be voted again to parliament if the civil society movement for clean candidates does not bear fruit. The 8th parliament has, however, ended its five-year journey, mostly as a dysfunctional body with continuous boycott by the opposition, a crucial

component of the parliament. When there had been an occasion that the opposition was present in parliament most of the time was wasted in polemics, vilification, and angry exchanges of words that had absolutely no bearing on national affairs. Given its lacklustre and deplorable performance the 8th parliament never emerged as a legislative body worth its name. One thing we can be sure of is that there is a shocking lack of maturity, morality, and even quality, the ingredients needed for deliberation in a body of utmost honour and dignity, in many of our lawmakers. The budget session is surely of crucial importance for the nation. When an MP is given the floor for budget discussion he must not be allowed to embark upon character assassination of his rival. But this has become a regular practice. The history of our national parliament has essentially been a story of dashed hopes and aspirations all these years after democracy was restored in 1991 following the collapse of the autocratic regime of Ershad. So far, we have not been satisfied that parliament has been able to answer public concerns. Prime examples are the terrorist attack on August 21, 2004 on an AL rally, and the country-wide violence perpetrated on August 17,

2005, which have never been deliberated upon by the parliament. It indeed makes a sad and sordid commentary that AL MPs, who did not attend the sessions for a long time, submitted as many as 169 notices for discussion on issues of national importance including price spiral of essentials, power crisis, and corruption. All the notices came as adjournment motions, but the speaker rejected all the notices. The nation feels quite vexed at this partisan role of the speaker who has the responsibility for initiating a meaningful debate in the house on such significant public issues. The nation's aspiration for a vibrant and effective parliament will remain a mirage unless both the ruling and opposition MPs are given equal opportunity to ventilate their points of view, which is the point of view of the people. Sadly, such impartiality has not been witnessed through the whole tenure of the 8th parliament.

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