

The fertiliser crisis

Farmers' concerns must be addressed

THE old fertiliser question crops up again. The Bangladesh Chemical Industries Corporation would have us know that 85,000 metric tons of fertiliser were supplied to 16 northern districts of the country against a minimum requirement of 1,05,000 metric tons for the current boro season. The shortfall is cause for worry. What makes the worry more acute is the fact that warehouses have lately been found to be empty of stocks, with the result that farmers in these districts have been getting jittery about the problem. And well they might, but there are too the reasons behind the problem that need quick addressing. Those reasons centre on transport handicaps, which again are a consequence of poor river navigation in a season noted for a relatively low water level in the rivers.

Obviously, it is a predicament which comes in tandem with others. There are delays in the supply chain. But when you add to that the further delay caused by a group of agents, who easily make it appear that a labour shortage makes it difficult for fertiliser to be unloaded, you comprehend a little more how perfectly normal problems can get entwined with man-made ones. Which is why it now makes sense to suggest that the authorities go for some swift emergency measures to tackle the issue. One of the ways of dealing with the problem ought to be a review of the whole dealership principle in the long run, including the role of middlemen in the supply of fertiliser. All too often, complaints about a delayed supply or non-supply of fertiliser to farmers have directly involved middlemen. The matter thus acquires urgency of a sort. Beyond that, the authorities could from here on mull over a diversification of supply through utilizing district as well as local bodies. Simultaneously, a significant change in the situation can be brought about through open market sales of fertiliser. It must be borne in mind that before any serious level of public resentment arises over an inadequate supply of fertiliser, concerted efforts must be made to meet up the deficit where the problem threatens to be acute.

Meanwhile, the authorities, as a way of allaying public concerns, would do well to come forth with a statement regarding the production, possible import, stock conditions and distribution of fertiliser. Such a step will throw up a clearer picture of the situation before the country, especially to its farming population.

Arrests of JMB activists

Reinvigorate the combing operation

We must not let our guards down against the religious extremists who had tried not very long ago to force their ideas on us to the extent of taking people's lives to establish what they think is the way politics should run in Bangladesh. The fact that the JMB cadres are being nabbed still today even after their top brasses are in the cage is a clear indication of the deep rooted organisation and network of the group.

We had chronicled in the past the rise of the group cautioning the administration and the people in general about how well entrenched these people were, and that we must never suffer from any euphoria of their end with the capture of their leadership. If we do that it will be only at our own peril.

The JMB leadership is awaiting the execution of their death sentence. They have admitted, reportedly, to their involvement in the movement to establish a political philosophy they claim to be motivated by Islam, when in fact what they tried to establish could not have been farther from it. But their execution may not necessarily see the end in the propagation of their ideology which they sought to initiate, unsuccessfully.

The fact that more than a dozen JMB activists have been apprehended very recently, some mid-level leaders among them, shows that they were in hiding so long but are well prepared to break cover and move into action should situation seem favourable. We need to be extra alert since, reportedly, the group had threatened to resort to violence should the government carry out the death sentence of the JMB leadership.

We are certain that the intelligence agencies would be moving on the lead provided by the captured radicals, and through more intensified combing operations capture all the operatives. It might help prevent speculations if the government were to let us know how far it is into finding out the links of the organisation -- both external and internal, and the source of their finance, without giving such details that might jeopardize future action against these elements.

Stumbling war on terror

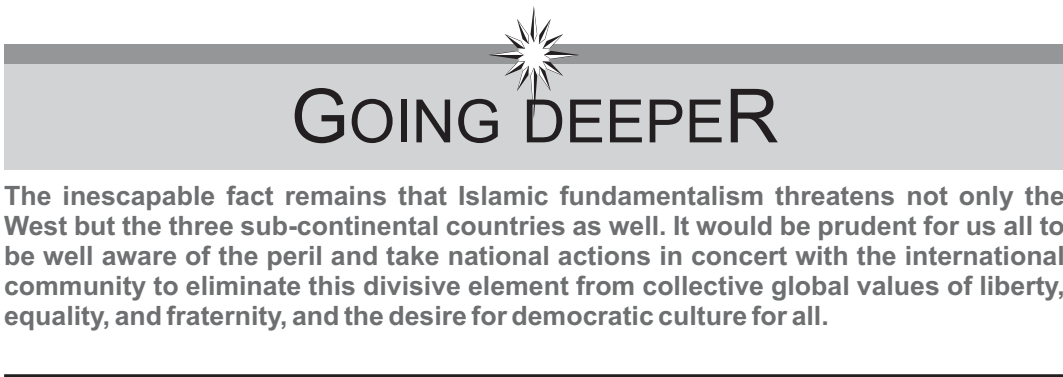


KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

US Vice President Dick Cheney's unannounced visit to Pakistan generated speculation about the extent of Pakistan's efforts on the pursuit of war on terror. Cheney does not go anywhere, says South Asian scholar Barnett Rubin, unless there is some trouble in the place he travels to.

One obvious reason for Cheney's visit was perhaps to encourage President Pervez Musharraf to redouble his efforts in controlling the reported increase of Taliban insurgents' incursions into Afghanistan from the lawless Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

Afghan President Hamid Karzai and President Musharraf have already engaged in public debate, each blaming the other, for the increased Taliban attacks on the NATO and Afghan forces that Karzai believes could not have been possible without sanctuary and assistance from the areas not fully under federal control, an area described by President Bush as "wilder than the wild West".



The inescapable fact remains that Islamic fundamentalism threatens not only the West but the three sub-continental countries as well. It would be prudent for us all to be well aware of the peril and take national actions in concert with the international community to eliminate this divisive element from collective global values of liberty, equality, and fraternity, and the desire for democratic culture for all.

Cheney is reported to have warned President Musharraf that \$3 billion given as aid to Pakistan could be in jeopardy if Pakistan's current efforts to de-Talibanise the FATA and incursions into Afghanistan from Pakistan by the insurgents were not stopped.

Meanwhile former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto has claimed that she would be able to stop the Talebans from increasing their strength inside Pakistan if she were to be re-elected prime minister of the country. Basically both Bhutto and Nwaz Sharif, along with many others, firmly believe that the current authoritarian rule under American patronage, reminiscent of Cold War tolerance of "democracy deficit," is responsible for the current mess.

But the history of Pakistan in the last fifty years of military rule intermittently intruded upon by democratically elected civilian administration provides evidence to the contrary. While Samuel Huntington is celebrating the fourth wave of democratization following the changes in "East Europe" (a term

former Soviet client states forcefully contest these days), and the dramatic changes taking place in Latin America, and President Bush is fighting doggedly the war on terror, described by some detractors as war on Islam, President Musharraf is going on full steam for re-election as president by the same parliamentary coalition of largely Islamist groups who gave him the presidency in 2002 without waiting for a new parliamentary election scheduled for January 2008.

The Americans are acutely aware of the fact that President Musharraf's deal with the tribal leaders of status quo ante if ties with the Talibans were cut and cross border raids were stopped has failed. Former intelligence czar, John Negroponte, told the Congress last year that the "tribal authorities are not living up to the deal" and that the cross border incursions into Afghanistan had doubled.

Such a record does not speak well of Bush administration's decision to designate Pakistan as a major non-NATO ally for the pur-

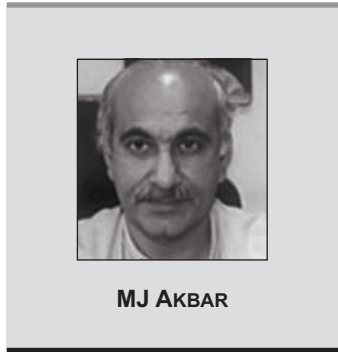
pose of bilateral military relations. In 2003 Colin Powell, as secretary of state, had described Pakistan as "a moderate, modern Muslim nation, a nation that is becoming increasingly democratic" -- and allayed fears of the possibility of any sudden change in Pakistan's policy on the war on terror should President Musharraf be assassinated.

Colin Powell assured that the US was working with the government of Pakistan which did not rest on any single individual and that the US was reaching out to all levels of Pakistani society.

The notion of "major non-NATO ally" (MNNA) status first surfaced in 1989. For several years this status was limited to Australia, Egypt, Israel, Japan and South Korea. Though MNNA does not enjoy the same benefits of defense and security guarantee afforded to NATO members, yet there are defense related advantages in the up gradation of military relationship.

In the case of Pakistan, skeptics hoped that the Bush administration had given serious consideration to the question of the reliability of

Storm signal

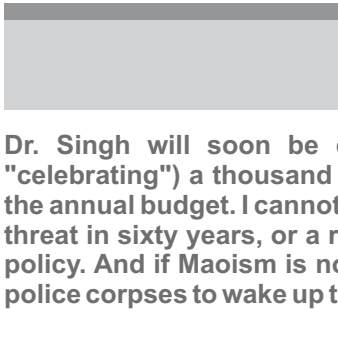


MJ AKBAR

THE standard rate is one word per dead policeman, so Dr. Manmohan Singh did his duty when he called the Maoist insurgency across half of India the gravest threat to the nation's internal security since independence. Fifty-five policemen were surrounded and killed in their forest camp at Chhattisgarh by Naxalites, and agency reports that I read quoted the prime minister's statement at around 55 words, give or take a few for poor mathematics (mine).

We can now expect the powerful Indian state to do one, or more, of three things: hold a conference of chief ministers on the "Naxalite menace" at which there is a lot of back-slapping when old friends meet across party lines; pull out a number of police battalions from a fire and send it to a cemetery, on the valid assumption that Naxalites will not hit the same place twice; agree upon a debate in parliament during which backbenchers are given a chance to speak by party whips. This is how Delhi dresses up its windows when it wants to protect itself from reality.

But why blame Dr. Manmohan Singh? He is an honest man. By his own admission, explained during innumerable speeches at favourite forums like the Confederation of Indian Industry, he has said, in so many words, that he became prime



Dr. Singh will soon be completing (I hope no one uses the ambitious term, "celebrating") a thousand days in office. A fortnight ago his government presented the annual budget. I cannot recall hearing anything about the gravest internal security threat in sixty years, or a remedy to suggest how it could be met through economic policy. And if Maoism is not an economic problem, then it is nothing. Did it need 55 police corpses to wake up the prime minister of India?

minister in order to make the rich richer so that a portion of their wealth could eventually trickle down to the poor.

Unfortunately, after three years of speeches, nothing has yet trickled down to the forests of Chhattisgarh, or even to the slums of its capital, Raipur. The proper thing for the poor to do, of course, is to wait for the momentum of Manmohanomics to reach their hovels.

But our Indian poor are a spoilt lot. They have become addicts of democracy, and expect a gush instead of a trickle. Moreover, they want it within the lifetime of a government they have elected.

For the decision-makers within the Indian elite, and its prime minister, Dr. Singh, Chhattisgarh is another country, as near or as remote as Vietnam was in their youth, and as Iraq is today. The dead are an accidental number, not real flesh and blood.

Even those who protect the elite, the policemen in Chhattisgarh, are not real, since constables are the few lucky ones among the poor to be given a uniform and a salary. Casualty rates in a battle between constables and Naxalites are an exchange of statistics among the have-nots. How does that affect the quality or abundance of a meal in Delhi?

The prime minister described this

as the gravest internal security threat since 1947. Those words were, or should have been, chosen with care. So who has raised the obvious question: what has he been doing about this gravest crisis during the last three years he has been prime minister?

The crisis did not erupt between March 13 and 15. Dr. Singh will soon be completing (I hope no one uses the ambitious term, "celebrating") a thousand days in office. A fortnight ago his government presented the annual budget. I cannot recall hearing anything about the gravest internal security threat in sixty years, or a remedy to suggest how it could be met through economic policy. And if Maoism is not an economic problem, then it is nothing.

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Nor is it very certain what he does achieve when he wakes up. The last time he was woken up was a few months ago when the Sachar report on the plight of Indian Muslims was presented to him. In the first flush of dawn-energy he suggested that a portion of government expenditure should be set aside for projects to help lift Indian Muslims.

His finance minister chose that moment to go deaf, and when the budget was presented, treated the suggestion with contempt. Dr. Singh

responded with silence. Someone must have informed him that Indian Muslims are familiar with betrayal, and in any case they have nowhere else to go apart from the Congress in national elections. Maybe I could tell the prime minister tomorrow's news today. The minorities of Chhattisgarh are drifting towards the Naxalites.

The biggest disappointment of the last three years has not been Dr. Singh, but the Left. The Maoists are today occupying political space either vacated by the Marxists, or which should have been occupied by them. The spread of the Naxalite movement is evidence of how large a national party, and force, the CPI(M) could have become if it had not been trapped by power, first in Bengal, and then, in the last three years, fooled by the honey-traps of Delhi.

Three years ago, for the first time, barring the odd exception of unstable experiments, the CPI(M) became the occupant of two significant bastions, one regional and the other national. Power in Bengal is at least real. Their power in Delhi is an illusion.

Whenever the Congress does them a favour and tells them that their influence is an illusion, they retreat behind another explanation. Indian Marxists have become ensnared by the oldest Indian

Pakistan as an ally of the US war on terror. Leon Haader of the Cato Institute advised Washington to view Pakistan, with its authoritarianism and insecure nuclear arsenal "as a reluctant supporter of US goals at best and as a potential long term problem at worst."

He did not see President Musharraf's decision to join the US on its war on terror as reflecting a structural transformation in Pakistan's policy but a tactical move to cut losses resulting from the demolition of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

Political analyst Matt Thundyll compared the US policy of cooperation with Pakistan as an alliance with a lesser evil against a greater evil. In reality, wrote Thundyll, like the Soviet threat in 1945, the Pakistani threat is extant. While in the case of the former it was communism, in Pakistan's case it is Islamic extremism.

Since the partition of India in 1945, Pakistan has been largely dictated by the politics of religion. Except for some feeble attempts to bring about secular values, both civilian and military rulers had appealed to the religious sentiments of the Pakistanis to gain legitimacy and to ensure survival.

According to a report by the Brussels based International Crisis Group, mullahs and military worked together against common foes during the Cold War period and have identical views on Kashmir and towards India. The fundamental fact remains that Muttahida-Majlishe-Amal (MMA), a conglomerate of religious fundamentalist political

parties, has a considerable presence in the center and rules the two provinces bordering Afghanistan with a declared Islamisation agenda.

Additionally, Pakistan is bedeviled with religious sectarian conflicts. The Sunnis are divided into two groups, one following the Deobandi School and the other the Barelvi school of thought. The Deobandis are anti-Shia. The hard cores among them, the vast majorities --consider the Shias infidels and demand constitutional amendment to that effect.

Sectarian killings are considered as jihad. One has to admit that Islamisation is an irreversible fact of life in Pakistan with its implicit anti-Western and anti-American sentiments remaining as integral parts of the Islamist agenda.

The inescapable fact remains that Islamic fundamentalism threatens not only the West but the three sub-continental countries as well. It would be prudent for us all to be well aware of the peril and take national actions in concert with the international community to eliminate this divisive element from collective global values of liberty, equality, and fraternity, and the desire for democratic culture for all.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

metaphor, the mayajaal. They should now take a few courses in Indian philosophy.

Enough of Lenin already, as the theorists of globalisation might put it.

The poor are illiterate because the Indian state has not found the resources for their education. This does not mean that they are stupid. The illiterate may not be able to read the alphabet but they are brilliant at reading a signal.

In the last three years, if the signals from Delhi have been inadequate, then the ones from Kolkata have been appalling, if only because the poor have had higher expectations from Kolkata.

It is hardly a coincidence that the Naxalite attack in Chhattisgarh should occur in the same week that the Marxist government in Kolkata ordered the death of villagers protecting their land in the now well-known village of Nandigram in Bengal.

The land is required by the Marxist government in order to sell it to an Indonesian multi-national which will use it to create a Special Economic Zone (SEZ), the new mantra of progressive enlightenment. All the classic elements of "bourgeoisie oppression" were at play: instead of negotiation with the people, force was ordered.

An instrument of state that went on a rampage received the official protection of the state government in the Assembly, and the judiciary had to step in to force a CBI enquiry into the incident. The chief minister, who justified the police action, added that if the people did not want the SEZ he would not insist on it. How many more corpses does he need to complete his education?

The party line is known: three decades ago, the CPI(M) consolidated its vote through radical reforms that gave agricultural land

to the sharecropper. The children of that sharecropper now need jobs, and industrialisation must be pushed through at any cost.

The current cost is not only splashed with blood, but mocks ideologues with its ironies. Land that was given to the sharecroppers by the Marxists is being retaken to take jobs whose profits will go to multi-nationals.

The party that sold us decades of rhetoric against Indian capitalism (the running dogs of imperialism) is now the flag bearer of international capitalism, willing to kill the poor to enforce the power of this flag. There are other routes to salvation for the poor, apart from killing them.

The bitter story of Nandigram is complicated by the fact that many of the affected are Muslims who trusted the Marxists for thirty years, and now feel abandoned by every political party in the democratic space. Where is their anger heading?

On March 15, a rally of Muslims marched to parliament in Delhi to demand that the Sachar report needed to be translated into economic policies. Among the banners were those of the Students Islamic Organisation of India. They carried a message: Special Exploitation Zone.

The poor are very good at reading signals from government. Is there anyone in government who knows how to read signals from the poor?

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

Three Rs, Bangladesh-style

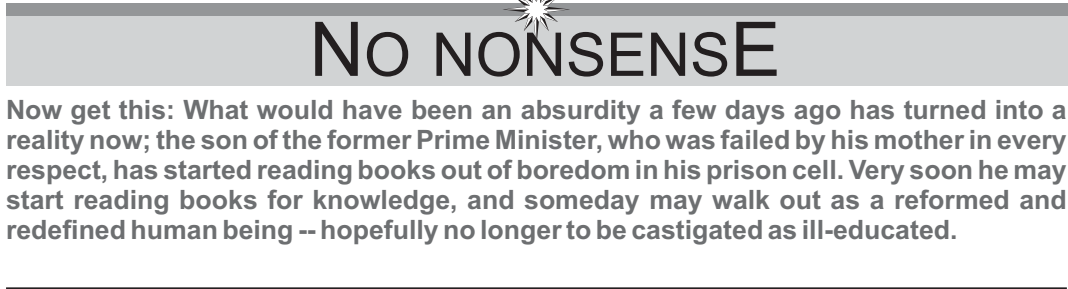


ABDULLAH A DEWAN

FOR better or worse, our politicians, in the prevailing prohibitions of political activities, have started spending time in reading, writing and possibly "re-educating" themselves, as if those are the last things they ever conceived of.

The original three "Rs" -- "reading, riting (writing), and rithmatic (arithmetic)" -- are three academic skills, which students must acquire in order to excel in their future responsibilities. Unfortunately, in our educational institutions future politicians skip the three "Rs" and instead adopt one different "R" entirely -- "running."

For years, running for student government, running from studies



Now get this: What would have been an absurdity a few days ago has turned into a reality now: the son of the former Prime Minister, who was failed by his mother in every respect, has started reading books out of boredom in his prison cell. Very soon he may start reading books for knowledge, and someday may walk out as a reformed and redefined human being -- hopefully no longer to be castigated as ill-educated.

and the police have been the essence of being a student politician. After graduation, they again run for political office, and then run for local or national offices -- and now, as we've seen, many are running from the law while others stopped running at the end line -- the prison gate.

We may not feel apologetic for today's political climate, which finds some of our politicians reading, writing and socializing with family and relatives, while many of their colleagues are passing agonizing nights with their cell phones switched off, hiding scared from law enforcers.

What is baffling though is that many BNP politicians or their lackeys think that the shots are still being called from their former "castle of corruption" --

HawaBhaban.

Consider, for example, former energy adviser Mahmudur Rahman's scornful display of arrogance in filing a defamation suit against this daily for a minor news item in which his name was published along with 41 other alleged corrupt absconders. Perhaps this gentleman should be concerned with his possible culpability in the failing state of the energy sector rather than hedging for money coming from law suits.

Many of the accomplices to corruption don't realize that the days of intimidating and harassing journalists and the media are gone; so also the reign of Falu, Mamun, Huda, Tarique, and Khaleda, and the politics of all the rest. No wonder Charles De Gaulle once said: "I

have come to the conclusion that politics are too serious a matter to be left to the politicians."

Politicians have a hand in thousands of decisions important to their communities and the country. It is therefore imperative that they are knowledgeable, and can read, write, and comprehend what they read. Lack of such attributes in people who ran the country is largely responsible for the predicament the country is coping with today.

Many people argue that the CTG would not have been able to bring the spate of reforms so far consummated, or been able to chase and chain the corrupt, if they had not had the backing of the army. They forget that the true credit goes to the people for their awe-inspiring support and patience.

The CTG is also succeeding in their reform mission because they are not traditional "rent seeking" politicians -- they are educated, enlightened, and capable of linking politics, economics, and the people.

With reference to the politicians, one would like to know: What do they read? Why do they want to write? Is it to entertain, to inform, to explain, to persuade? Ostensibly, these are the most common motivations for writing, at least if they're writing something for someone else to read.

In a February 17 e-mail to former law minister Barrister Moudud Ahmed, I wrote: "If you cannot clean up the party with a truly all-encompassing educated, competent, and qualified person on top, my advice for you would be to quit politics, go back to the bar, fight for the common people for justice, establish good legal precedence, and thus leave a legacy. Use your legal mind to write books on law and good governance. With your experience serving nearly all governments since independence and your understanding of the complexities of laws and regulations, no one is better equipped to write than you." In his reply, Moudud graciously took note of my observations.

Believe it or not, the amount of vital information one can get from reading a single article on a topic of interest may save time and efforts from reading several books on related issues since in many instances the columnist wrote the article based on research and experience.

Make no mistake, reading a book cannot be substituted by reading a newspaper article, but time constraints may deter from such an undertaking. Another effective way

one can keep up to date with current issues is by organizing, attending and participating in seminars. One disappointing trait of most politicians is that they display a blasé attitude towards reading and writing anything seriously. This means they don't develop serious ideas of their own, rendering themselves more susceptible to any shallow scheme their advisers and consultants draw them into.

It's surely true of politicians across national boundaries, but its prevalence among our major parties is a serious concern, as they will soon either be in power or be part of the opposition.

Although, prior to occupying high offices, politicians swear an oath to uphold, defend, and abide by it, they display an impression that they didn't really read the Constitution, let alone think about what it says, how to introduce new bills or amend some old rules.

Politicians should also read and think about various local and national issues, which may include poverty alleviation, infrastructure development, public health, senior citizens welfare, terrorism, reducing patronization of student politics, and so on.

Dr. Abdullah A Dewan is Professor of Economics at Eastern Michigan University.