

## Flaws in fertiliser distribution glaring

Nahole incident rings with lessons to heed

**T**HE violent outbursts of farmers on the heels of an incident centring around collection of fertiliser quota slips from Nahole upazila office has brought to the fore the issue of chronic mismanagement in the distribution of the important input to the agriculturists. In the face of persistent demand for the input, the local administration had arranged to supply authorisation slips to them to collect the stuff from the dealers.

As the slips were being distributed by the sub-assistant agriculture officer to the farmers standing in a queue of 3000 persons, the upazila nirbahi officer (UNO) allegedly intervened objecting to the handing over of the slips under signature from the agricultural officer. The UNO went furious and slapped the officer concerned when he pleaded for the farmers to get a quota of two bags to three farmers instead of one bag allotted to two farmers. This enraged the farmers and what followed was vandalism and riotous behaviour which cannot be condoned even allowing for the state of anxiety they were in to be getting their quota of the input. Yet, what basically triggered the mayhem was the extremely high-handed manner in which the UNO treated the official and the apparent disdain he showed to the farmers by scolding them. Such behaviour from government officials dealing with the public is highly condemnable.

On the same day, Andulbaria union at Chuadanga was reportedly besieged by farmers protesting availability of 180 bags of urea as against the demand for 2000 bags.

The government has been consistently asserting that the stocks are sufficient and there is no fertiliser crisis as such. Whilst stocks are good, a crisis may still emanate from a flawed distribution system which seems to have been the case here. What is crystal clear is that over the years we have failed to evolve any effective distribution network as far as making agricultural inputs available to the farmers on time and in adequate quantities goes. The dealers' appointments were largely partisan and they have been averse to any notion of fixed prices. The rationing of fertiliser may have been in part prompted by the apprehension that it might be smuggled into neighbouring countries where the fertiliser prices are higher than ours.

All this calls for making public the overall stock position with district wise breakup in a bid to remove any possible misgiving in the public mind about portents of any fertiliser crisis developing. Such a move must necessarily be accompanied by putting a fair distribution mechanism in place.

## The release of Alan Johnston

Journalists can beat terror by defying it

**T**HE release of the BBC journalist Alan Johnston after 114 days of captivity at the hands of his abductors has caused relief everywhere. We welcome the development, especially in light of our conviction that newsmen must be allowed unfettered freedom to do justice to their profession, without fear or coercion. As far as we are concerned, Johnston was merely doing his job and that was hardly any reason for him to be snatched off the streets by those who clearly did not agree with him. Johnston, we may point out here, is not the only journalist who has been in danger zones in recent times. Across countries and continents, there have been journalists who have been kidnapped and often murdered. In other instances, media persons have been killed outright, as last year's murder of a Russian woman journalist so eerily demonstrated.

It is against this background that Alan Johnston's freedom can be regarded as a fortunate circumstance. And a good deal of the credit for his release certainly goes to Hamas, which showed purposefulness in negotiating with his captors about his fate. By no means a moderate political organisation, a fact made clear in the unfolding Palestinian drama of the last one year, Hamas has nevertheless made it clear that the abduction of individuals cannot be part of politics. The so-called Army of Islam, which kidnapped Johnston, and other bodies like it should therefore understand that their "jihadi" spirit stands to lose credibility when their policies narrow down to the concept of capturing individuals and holding them to ransom. It is their image which takes a battering from such ill-conceived and outrageous moves.

As we welcome Johnston back to the real world, we will expect him to return to doing his work with redoubled energy. The best way for journalists to beat terror is to defy it, through upholding the calling and principles of their profession.

## Three down, one to go



ZAFAR SOBHAN

### STRAIGHT TALK

But it is worth bearing in mind that some miscalculations could have massive unexpected consequences, and while the government cannot be expected to get everything right, if they get the question of Islamism wrong, then nothing else they accomplish will be worth anything. If the main political parties are decimated and the Islamists are left intact then there will be a massive power vacuum that they will sweep in to fill. This is elementary history.

man to see some of these people called to account for their misdeeds in office and breaking bricks for their rest of their lives -- and it is certainly no more than many of them deserve.

Nevertheless, from a purely practical point of view, if we can get them out of politics I think the nation can let its thirst for vengeance go unquenched without suffering unduly.

The main thing is to see that they are beyond rehabilitation. The danger in cutting deals to permit them to weasel out of prison sentences is that there remains a real chance that if they are let off the hook that they might be back.

But assuming that it is possible to ensure that there are no more second acts for those who have abused the public trust and enriched themselves at the public trough, one could be content to merely see such individuals banished from public life.

Either way, it now seems clearer than ever that the oligopoly of the existing political parties is what the current administration is intent on breaking up. At one point it seemed as though the existing political

parties might be resurrected under new leadership, but this was always an iffy proposition, mainly for the reason that most who had been identified as the "new" leadership were not new and were as corrupt and compromised as the old leadership. The batch of "new" leaders are still in the picture, but my guess is that at the end of the day they will also be happy enough to retire from politics "voluntarily" in order to stay out of prison.

So what next?

Well, the current crop of political parties will still exist. However, it remains to be seen whether their misdeeds of the past fifteen years (and before) coupled with the current action that has discredited them in the public eye, has contaminated their brand identity beyond which it is in anyone's interest to try to resurrect them.

The parties will almost certainly continue to exist in some form or other, but whether they will continue to be the titanic figures they have been in the nation's polity thus far or whether reformers will choose to rally under a new banner, remains to be seen.

It should be noted at this point

that there have been a number of reports of a third party being bruited under the leadership of a rather obscure one-time senior BNP leader which has so far attracted a rag-tag group of similarly obscure middle-ranking politicians. On the whole, this new formation does not seem much of a candidate to emerge as the new vital centre of Bangladeshi politics. Though one never knows.

However, would it be too alarmist to point out that there amidst all the high-profile arrest and incarceration and retirement of senior AL, BNP, and JP leaders, that there remains in Bangladesh a fourth large national party that appears to have been left entirely out of the calculations.

I refer, of course, to the Jamaat-e-Islam, a party that has been conspicuously absent from the headlines these past six months. Conventional wisdom suggests that the reason for this is that the Jamaat is less corrupt than the other parties. Perhaps so. But if it is Jamaat corruption you are looking for, please permit me to point you in the direction of Pirojpur and Rajshahi, for starters.

Nor does the Jamaat lag when it comes to common or garden thuggery and hooliganism. Jamaat and Shibir cadres control their territories with a famously iron hand and their connections to organised crime and extortion in the localities they run is well established. Indeed, the brutality and viciousness of Shibir cadres is second to none in the country.

This is not even to mention the party's cast-iron connections to militants and radicals.

From time immemorial, non-elected regimes in the Muslim world have chosen to target secular opposition only.

Time and again, it is the Islamists who are left untouched and use the opportunity to strengthen and consolidate.

Time and again it is the Islamists, who, by remaining untouched, rise to the fore-front of the democratic opposition.

Time and again, it is they, promising social justice and equality and freedom from corruption, who step authoritatively into the void created by non-democratic rule.

This could be the moment that the Islamists have been waiting for these past thirty-six years. They have never risen to 10% in the polls, but with their secular rivals discredited and their leadership and party apparatus more or less unscathed, they could emerge as serious players in the next elections.

Right now, these are tough times for the interim government. No question. The gargantuan and unprecedented nature of the

project at hand means that there will be mistakes and miscalculations. That is to be expected.

But it is worth bearing in mind that some miscalculations could have massive unexpected consequences, and while the government cannot be expected to get everything right, if they get the question of Islamism wrong, then nothing else they accomplish will be worth anything.

If the main political parties are decimated and the Islamists are left intact then there will be a massive power vacuum that they will sweep in to fill. This is elementary history.

It has happened again and again the length and breadth of the Muslim world, and, more than anything else, we need to be careful that it does not happen here.

I have seen no evidence that the current government is even in the slightest bit aware let alone concerned about this phenomenon.

More important than the institutional reforms, more important than the corruption cases, more important than the political reforms -- the most crucial thing is to ensure that no vacuum is created that will create an opening to shift the country decisively to the right.

Because once we move in that direction, it is a long, difficult path back. Bangladesh will be changed radically, and irrevocably, for the worse. There is no more important concern today than to ensure that this does not happen.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

## An amusing Ayub



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

### CROSS TALK

Ayub's diaries are a lesson in history that, sooner or later, all books close on life. The dictator missed his chances to amuse us when he was alive. He ruled by dictate and fancy of mind. Little did we know that he would make a comeback to finish his role! The book closes on the irreversible truth that one can defer destiny, but one can't escape it. It is recommended for leaders of his kind, but entertainment for rest of us.

much of his political woes had come from us.

Listen to Humayun Gauhar, son of Ayub's trusted friend Altaf Gauhar. He writes in *The Nation*, a Pakistani daily, that Ayub had lost his grip after 1965. He was struggling with bouts of depression, torturing himself over the terrible defeat in the war, followed by an illness that nearly killed him. The remaining years of his life were marked by disloyalty, betrayal and paranoia.

Humayun then gives us the bottom line, "It is time to say loud and clear that the President was deliberately mistreated in order to kill him." All conspirators were Ayub's own people including his military "son" Yahya and political "son" Bhutto, he confirms.

That should explain why the book thoroughly reeks of bitterness left in the mouth of an ousted dictator. Ayub has trained his fire on everyone who got his goat and ranted like a madman. He lambasted people and nation, calling names to friends, foes and followers, sparing not even Pir Dewal Sharif, his spiritual mentor.

Perhaps the conditions surrounding the time of writing suggest that an agonised Ayub could have been in a state of less-than-lucid mind. People like F.S. Ajazuddin, who wrote in *The Asian Age*, have squarely questioned the source and authenticity of the book.

One of the revelations in the book has sent shockwaves to India. Ayub talks about an Indian Director of Military Intelligence from the 1950s who had sold the country's war plans to the Pakistanis for 20,000 rupees. This has drawn flak from the Indian side, and when questioned about this Indian "mole," Ayub's son Gohar Ayub gave a description that fits none other than India's most revered general Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw.

There have been angry protests

from many people in India including its former Chief of Army Staff General Shankar Roy Choudhary. But more than protests this type of unrestrained remarks have undermined the credibility of the book.

The book should have produced more evidence and Gohar Ayub should have backed up his description with real proof.

If the book was impounded for all these years so that its "sensitive material" ceased to be part of contemporary history, why couldn't it come back with a bit more flesh around facts?

When it comes to East Pakistan, Ayub argues with Freudian aplomb. "I am surprised at the Bengali outlook," he writes and then goes on to explain his hypothesis. "It doesn't conform to any rational yardstick. They were exploited by the caste Hindus, the Muslim rulers and even the British."

Then he castigated the Bengalis for their failure to appreciate how the advent of Pakistan had got

them

the

blessing

of

freedom

and

equality.

During the Civil War, the American people complained about Abraham Lincoln's funny stories. His critics said that he was frivolous and his own Secretary of War referred to him as an ape. But then Lincoln rose to the stature of a great leader by taking care of some pretty serious business. He ended the civil war, abolished slavery and united his country.

One couldn't expect loftier views of culture and society from a man whose vision went as far as the barrel of his gun. Yes, he had done many cosmetic changes in the country, built roads and buildings, the credit for the planning of Sangshad Bhaban, Television Bhaban and the Second Capital in East Pakistan and countless more projects in West Pakistan goes to his times.

We have had a homegrown military ruler who ruled us for nine years and built many fantastic roads. There is something interesting about military regimes. They connect places, but not so much the people.

As Ayub's diaries are a lesson in history that, sooner or later, all books close on life. The dictator missed his chances to amuse us when he was alive. He ruled by dictate and fancy of mind. Little did we know that he would make a comeback to finish his role! The book closes on the irreversible truth that one can defer destiny, but one can't escape it. It is recommended for leaders of his kind, but entertainment for rest of us.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

## Speed is the need



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

### STRAIGHT LINE

As of now, the core issue is not so much what the police does, but why it does and what it does. It is time to make the police work for the people. However, there are major influential vested interests within the bureaucracy, and in society generally, that will fight to preserve the status quo.

directed by the 1861 Police Act. Speedy reforms of the police become urgent and relevant because this Act was principally aimed to administer a static, immobile and backward rural society living in villages and small towns.

It envisages exercise of authority without local accountability. It presupposes a society without any constitution, basic and fundamental rights, organised public opinion, and mass media projecting and agitating the public interest.

The police system as conceived in the 1861 Act worked well from the standpoint of clearly perceived objectives of colonial rule. Rule of law was subordinate to the demands of order. As there was no day-to-day conflict between the dictates of justice and the interests of order, it was possible to achieve

significantly high levels of both law and order.

Since 1947, and more so after 1971, the whole purpose of governance has changed; from a holding function the emphasis has shifted to economic and social justice. However, organisational change for policing a supposedly free society is just not there.

In the broader context, there is an appreciation of the rationale of police reform and its contribution and linkages to wider reform agendas, such as: National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction implementation with the importance of safety and security in facilitating economic growth; the role of the police in improving access to justice; the contribution that an effective police service makes to counter terrorism.

The move towards increasing compliance with international conventions related to protecting human rights assumes added significance. Simultaneously, there is the intent to sustain the de-politicisation of the service and strengthen the crime prevention and detection roles, while gradually decreasing the public order and surveillance activities. The reform need is paramount because servicing the needs of the people has to become the focus of a forward-looking police force.

Coming to specifics, the requirement is to replace the Police Act of 1861 with a new Police Act, which would not only change the system of superintendence and control over police but also enlarge the role of the police to make it function as an agency which promotes the rule

of law in the country and renders impartial service to the community.

Another important thrust of reform should be to ensure that the investigative tasks of the police are beyond any kind of intervention by the executive or non-executive.

In respect of preventive and service-oriented functions only, the government should lay down broad policies for adoption. However, there should be no so-called executive instruction with regard to actual police operations in the field.

Policy directions should be given openly, and be made known to the stakeholders.

The government should discharge the superintending responsibility in an open manner under the framework of law, a Public Safety Commission/Security Commission established through appropriate statute.

Such commission as above should:

- Lay down broad policy guidelines for the performance of preventive and service-oriented functions by the police.

• Evaluate the performance of police every year.

• Function as a forum of appeal to dispose representations from

officers regarding their being subjected to illegal orders, and regarding their promotions.

• Generally review the functioning of the police force.

The chief of police should be assured of a fixed tenure of office. Premature expiry of the tenure should be approved by the aforementioned Commission. Urban policing should be promptly extended to all towns having significant populations.

Ensuring gender-sensitive policing should be a critical element of the on-going police reform efforts. Programs and strategies aimed at changing police attitudes towards women should involve proactive induction of substantially large proportions of women into the police forces. A gender-sensitive training strategy should be integral to the police reform agenda.

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so much what the police does, but why it does and what it does. It is time to make the police work for the people.

However, there are major influential vested interests within the bureaucracy, and in society generally, that will fight to preserve the status quo.