

Stopping expropriation of forestland

A job cut out for this government

BHAWAL forest, an area long known for its biodiversity and ecological importance, has of late been systematically reduced to an industrial and recreational zone owing to the activities of unscrupulous businessmen and corrupt officials. The risks posed to the woodlands can easily be fathomed through the news report that as many as 10,366 acres in Gazipur and Savar have gone into the hands of encroachers, who have been setting up industrial units, picnic spots, recreation centres and even auto repair workshops there. And all of this has come about through a collusive network involving predatory businessmen, politically influential elements and dishonest forest officials.

Since the present government has no political axe to grind or any vested interest to serve, it is ideally placed to go all-out against such encroachment. It can take stern measures in this regard, the goal being not only a prevention of such criminal acts in future but also a recovery of the land already lost to the encroachers. It is not merely Bhawal forest which needs to be reclaimed but other areas in the country as well, since altogether 2,62,492 acres of forests have been grabbed by encroachers nationwide. The authorities, as part of their on-going offensive against corruption, must move swiftly and decisively against the collusive network that has been behind the land grab. This can be done through a detailed examination of the original land records maintained by the forest department and thereby spotting the fraud that has been perpetrated. It will be a hard job since these forestlands have been robbed through forgery of land records and other documents through collusion between corrupt revenue and forest officials. That is where the second priority of the authorities should come in, namely, identifying these officials and charging them under the relevant provisions of the law. Then comes the matter of retrieving the land records that are allegedly lost owing to what is described as torn record books and the like. What the forest department can do is go for an updating of land records and taking effective measures toward a computerisation of the system. In an era of technology, there can be no excuses about a difficulty in maintaining proper records.

Part of the job of the government is to go after people who have, in the name of setting up industries, trusts and the like, occupied forestland and haul them up before the law. Unless corrective steps are taken, and soon, there is a danger that increasingly larger areas of forestland will be lost, condemning the nation to unmitigated environmental disaster.

Teesta water sharing

JRC should move energetically to seal a deal

THE water secretaries' level joint committee of experts (JCE) meeting in New Delhi with its limited agenda on the table ended inconclusively. For the last ten years, India and Bangladesh have been engaged in talks, on and off, on the question of sharing the waters of Teesta and seven other common rivers without a tangible forward foothold reached in terms of resolving the issue. We recall a good deal of optimism having been generated by the Ganges water treaty signed a decade ago to carry forward the overall task of equitable distribution of common river waters between the two countries. But this has not been lived up to.

The JCE meeting in Delhi, first in the last three years, was said to be seeking to firm up an interim deal on sharing waters of Teesta and seven other common rivers. The natural question to ask would be: why even after thirty-six years of our neighbourly co-existence we still find ourselves locked in a quest for an interim solution. Should we not have resolved the question on a durable basis by now?

Dhaka demands equal distribution of 80 percent of the Teesta water between the two countries with a stipulation for conservation of 20 percent as the river's natural flow. New Delhi demands a greater share claiming that a larger portion of the river flows through its territory. India reportedly wants 39 percent to Bangladesh's 36 percent. The matter has been referred to the joint rivers commission (JRC) for resolution at the water ministers' level.

Besides referring the differences to the JRC, the joint statement has recognised some problems requiring a common approach. Forty points in India and twenty-nine in Bangladesh have been identified for river protection work with a decision taken to exchange construction details of various riverbank works, including lift irrigation schemes on common rivers. Dredging and pure water supply issues will be taken up. Information sharing will help 'bring transparency and remove apprehensions on both sides', as has been aptly put in the statement.

While such confidence building measures and attention to detail are welcome, we must emphasise the need for an early JRC meet to take up the matter and resolve the common river water issue. It's of utmost importance that India as the upper riparian state feels obliged to come the extra mile to meet the water requirements of Bangladesh.

Economic or political reform: Which should come first?



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

WHILE corruption is believed to have invariant characteristics of secret exchanges among political, social and economic markets in violation of social rules and norms through illegal access given to individuals and groups in exchange of tangible benefits to the parties concerned, a debate has arisen about the road map to the reduction of corruption in a given society.

In a forthcoming book, *The Bulging Pocket and the Rule of Law: Corruption, Inequality and Trust*, Professor Dr. Eric Uslaner (University of Maryland; he recently visited Bangladesh) questioned the premise that economic reform should precede political reform.

Dr. Uslaner bases his arguments on the premises that democratic institutions are not a source of clean government, and elections can breed corruption. He states that the simple adoption of democratic institutions, without bringing the people out of the inequality trap (both economic and unfair legal system), goes against the poor who cannot afford to buy-off the authorities concerned, and would not reach the fruits of democracy to the people.

It is important for us to understand

GOING DEEPER

In short, economic reforms without political reforms, in order to give firm footing to a democratic dispensation, appear to be meaningless. One would suggest that in our preferential schedule both should be given equal weight so that all segments of the society are benefited, and that economic growth does not become a vehicle for corruption and kleptocracy.

this phenomenon because Bangladesh and some other countries (a few are on the verge of becoming, or have become, failed states) have been repeatedly ranked as some of the most corrupt countries of the world.

In any analysis like that of Dr. Uslaner's, a problem arises due to lack of clarity of the term "institutional reform." It is not readily understood if economic reforms in the form of monetary or fiscal policies and banking reforms, to name only a few, that are mainly undertaken by the government and the central bank are to be kept out of the definition of institutions.

In this age of democratisation, widely advocated by the Western world particularly in the wake of the end of the Cold War and the tragic events of 9/11, realisation has dawned upon the combatants of the Cold War that "democracy deficit" allowed by the then super-powers due to cold war dynamics ultimately boomeranged upon the West in the form of Islamic extremism.

The stunting of the growth of institutions supportive of democracy through the promotion of authoritarian rulers by providing them with money and materials has produced anger and frustration among the local

people, who logically felt aggrieved against the supporters of these rulers who were mostly the Western countries.

After the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, many of the Third World countries that were dependant on the largesse provided by the then super-powers were abandoned, reducing them to the status of failed states and failed governments.

Failed states have been variously defined. But the consensus is that these states are juridical shells that shroud an insecure and even a dangerous condition domestically. They have international legal existence but very little domestic political existence.

Because the UN charter specifically forbids external interference that could be construed as violation of sovereignty, the failed states have so far been immune to intrusion by others despite international consensus on the principle to protect unanimously embraced by the UN during the 60th anniversary of the World Summit in September 2005.

The concept of inviolability of a state's sovereignty underwent a change when non-state actors inflicted death and destruction upon unsuspecting civilians, as seen in the

events of 9/11, the Madrid and London bombings, and, most importantly, in Bangladesh by the Islamic extremists belonging to JMB.

Some leaders of the immediate past alliance government who had given them encouragement in their criminal activities have been given stiff prison sentences. It is ironic that the reports by NYT, Wall Street Journal, Time, etc. on the rise of Islamic militancy in Bangladesh, were dismissed by the then government in power as a concoction of the media and as a slight to Bangladesh.

Though the kingpins have been executed after trial in a court of law, it would be premature to believe that Bangladesh has totally got rid of Islamic extremists, because there are sixty thousand madrasas churning out students well versed in religious studies but completely unsuitable for a competitive modern world.

Another question that readily comes to mind is about the utility of economic reforms, in the absence of political reforms, that aim at egalitarian distribution of national wealth through establishing democracy on firm ground. If the economic reforms are directed at denying what Professors Bruce Bueno and George Downs of NYU call "social coordination" defined as "the set of activities

that people must engage in to win political power," such as disseminating information, recruiting and organising opposition members, choosing leaders, and developing a viable strategy to increase the group's power and to influence policy, then such reforms should be rejected.

The state's raison d'être lies, points out German philosopher Jurgen Habermas, primarily "in the guarantee of an inclusive process of opinion-and-will formation in which free and equal citizens reach an understanding on which goals and norms lie in the equal interest of all." Similarly it has been observed that "the democratic plurality that generates political power is conceptually distinct from, and very possibly incompatible with, the top-down, centralised coercion exercised by the state [and] ... the very legitimacy of the law depends on its being the expression of a voluntary public agreement between equals who have communicated their aims to one another."

The third worry that comes to mind in ascribing greater importance to economic reforms than political reforms is that faster growth in the economy may not necessarily bring about a more cohesive social structure due to increasing disparity of income between the haves and the have-nots.

This has been seen in Bangladesh and, among others, in the two fastest growing economies in the world -- China and India. The corollary effects of economic growth, without what Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz would call "moral growth" and Amartya Sen's "development as a fundamental right," are invariable growth of unplanned urbanization or slums, increase in criminalisation of society, and development of a nexus

between politicians and criminals. The 1/11 declaration of emergency has spurred political leaders to go in for reforms in the political parties, and in some cases reforms in state structure.

Freedom House, that ranks countries according to political rights and civil liberties enjoyed by the citizens, has accorded Least Developed Countries median scores (1 being freest and 7 being the least free), with Bangladesh scoring 3 for political rights and 4 for civil liberties, and being defined as partially free.

It is generally accepted that a correlation exists between good governance (and democracy) and economic development. That some command economies during the Cold War era had achieved remarkable economic development does not negate the argument that there is congruence between democracy and development mainly because, under democracy, the government is accountable to the people.

In short, economic reforms without political reforms, in order to give firm footing to a democratic dispensation, appear to be meaningless. One would suggest that in our preferential schedule both should be given equal weight so that all segments of the society are benefited, and that economic growth does not become a vehicle for corruption and kleptocracy.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

Facing post-flood crisis



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE flood has expanded its ravages across the country and the victims are waiting for succour and shelter. Nearly 10 million people are now suffering as the flood took an alarming turn submerging a vast area of the country.

A large number of people in the eastern part of Dhaka city have been rendered shelterless as the flood water inundated Badda, Bashabo, Nandipara and Trimohini due to absence of a flood control embankment. There is a crying need for shelter, food, drinkable water, and medical help for these people.

Every hour nineteen new diarrhoea patients are crowding into Dhaka's hospitals, let alone those in the outside areas. Flood water, mixed with sewage has been posing a threat to public health in the city. ICDDR in the city had to set up tents for the ever-increasing number of diarrhoea and cholera patients overwhelming the hospital. Diarrhoea and other water-borne diseases have broken out as an epidemic in almost all the districts.

The ongoing flood has been wreaking havoc on the country's agriculture. The production of paddy, jute, sugarcane and vegetables in 271 upazilas of 38 districts is affected seriously, which may lead to further

BY THE NUMBERS

Bangladesh is likely to face a major post-flood crisis. Millions of people are marooned, crops on thousands of hectares of land are damaged, roads and bridges are destroyed. One does not need much wisdom to apprehend the fearsome post-flood scenario. Only proper and timely planning to face post-flood crisis can save more lives and lessen suffering of the flood affected people.

increase in the price of food items, especially vegetables.

The Food and Disaster Management Ministry's press note said that the flood (that began in mid-July) had engulfed 38 out of 64 districts, causing damage to 89,048 houses completely and 658,594 houses partially. 2,817 km of roads have been damaged completely while 17,463 km roads have been damaged partially. Flood has damaged 332 educational institutes completely and 4,893 institutes partially.

According to primary estimates by the Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE), crops of 1.56 lakh hectares of land including 55,000 hectares of Aus crops have gone under flood water. DAE statistics also show that 20,744 hectares of vegetable land out of total 85,308 hectares, are now under flood water, while 20,977 hectares out of 116,342 hectare seedbeds have gone under water. It would be difficult to save the vegetables and the seedbeds in the flood affected areas if water stays for a long time, said a DAE source.

Besides, there is an alarm from the international donors for further food price hike and GDP fall. Donors' concerns were aired on August 8 at a special meeting of the local consultative group (LCG) comprising devel-

opment partners and the government. So the government must be on the alert to combat the ensuing crisis with post-flood planning for proper supply of food, seeds, medicine and also the soft agricultural credit to farmers.

The Council of Advisers of the caretaker government has asked the concerned ministries to do advance planning for post-flood rehabilitation operation. Concerned ministries should draw up elaborate programs to face the post-flood crisis.

The Agriculture Ministry, which has the most vital role to play, should provide support to the farmers for fertiliser, seeds and seed-bed preparation during the post-flood period. It should have plans to prepare seedbeds on high lands, from where the farmers could be given seeds free of cost.

The commercial banks and the specialised banks in the country should enhance their agricultural credit disbursement target and also expedite their credit operations for facilitating the post-flood cultivation process.

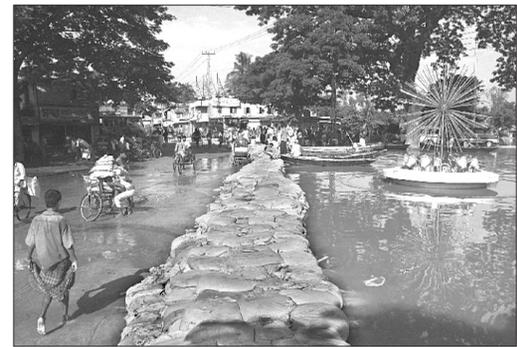
The government should take some post-flood rehabilitation programs including permanent shelter to those who have lost homes, free supply of seedlings to the farmers, providing adequate farm loans,

suspending interest for few months, increasing the number of VGF cards and taking other employment-generating projects. Bad days are really looming ahead if the government fails to deliver capacity building mechanism in agriculture, heavily damaged in this cataclysmic deluge, when the flood water will start receding.

Bangladesh is a country, which could not make headway as yet for attaining its self-sufficiency. The caretaker government did not seek relief from the international communities for the first time. The government, however, is willing to accept spontaneous cooperation from development partners at home and abroad in dealing with the exigencies caused by the raging floods across the country.

The chief adviser, in his address to the nation on August 5, has made an appeal to all sections of people, irrespective of class and profession, to come forward and join in relief operation for helping out the flood affected people. He also called for facing the disaster united equipped with whatever one has.

Floodwater has started receding leaving a trail of devastation and diseases, and the real problem of facing the post-flood crisis has just begun. Thousands of people grap-



Sirajganj, August 4.

pling with water-borne diseases, mostly with diarrhoea, need emergency health care. Non-availability of oral saline and medicines has made the situation worse. ICDDR has already sounded warning about outbreak of diarrhoea in an epidemic form in the flood-affected areas if the government fails to combat the situation.

Bangladesh is likely to face a major post-flood crisis. Millions of people are marooned, crops on thousands of hectares of land are damaged, roads and bridges are destroyed. One does not need much wisdom to apprehend the fearsome post-flood scenario. Only proper and timely planning to face post-flood crisis can save more lives and lessen suffering of the flood affected people.

The NGOs and the affluent people in the country should come forward in aid of the flood affected people along with the government measures tackling the post-flood crisis. The overall situation calls for a united approach to combat the post-flood

crisis. It is quite natural that the prices of all essentials will shoot up further in the post-flood period and the hoarders will continue to stock these items to create artificial crisis in the market. The government should take appropriate measures in order to off-set such trend. The issue of price hike has already become a serious concern and public resentment.

Bangladesh is not alone to face the flood catastrophe this year. Flood has hit India's Assam, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, and also Nepal. Bangladesh should take up the perennial flood issue including the river and water management of this reason to the next Saarc meeting to formulate a regional action plan to control flood jointly as has been done by many other countries.

A. N. M. Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star.

Pakistan at the crossroads

PHILIP H. GORDON

RECENT US intelligence warnings that Al-Qaeda is reorganising in Pakistan -- along with the recent debate among presidential candidates over whether the US should be prepared to take action there -- underscore a reality that has until recently been overlooked: The key to the war on terror lies not in Afghanistan, but next door in Pakistan.

Al-Qaeda is reorganising in Pakistan. Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri and other leaders hide in Pakistan. British and other extremists obtain terrorist training and financing in Pakistan, and the US has caught a majority of "high-value detainees" in Pakistan.

Pakistan also serves as a refuge, financial centre and training ground for Taliban fighters who seek to destabilise Afghanistan.

Recognition of this reality is not to suggest that the US and Nato ought to contemplate a military mission on the Pakistani side of the border. Recently when I traveled

around northwestern Pakistan, people were buzzing about former US Central Command General John Abizaid's comment that a crisis in Pakistan would make Afghanistan and Iraq "look easy," wrongly suspecting that he was hinting at the possible need for military force.

Military intervention in Pakistan, however, would be a recipe for disaster even if Nato had the 200,000 troops needed to do it on the scale of the Afghanistan mission -- which it does not. Even covert actions or targeted strikes on "actionable targets," which the Bush administration has not ruled out, could backfire. Obviously if the US obtains hard and specific evidence of the Al-Qaeda leadership's presence in Pakistan, it must act, preferably in cooperation with the government of Pakistan. But the Al-Qaeda presence in northwest Pakistan is dispersed across a vast, mountainous region, and US military actions there could turn fiercely nationalistic Pakistanis even further against the US without any certainty of hitting targets.

The problems in Pakistan may not have a military solution, but there is no use pretending that the US has the luxury of focusing only on the Afghan side of the border. Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf is in many ways a US ally who has provided valuable cooperation in the war on terror. But while he cooperates with the US by sending troops to hunt Al-Qaeda in the mountains, other branches of the Pakistani security establishment -- keen to protect their Pashtun brethren and fearful of Indian influence in Afghanistan -- actively support the Taliban. This leaves the US in an absurd situation: the US gives Pakistan around \$1 billion per year, mostly in military aid, some of which finds its way to the Taliban fighters that the rest is designed to fight.

Much of the discussion in Washington focuses on "pressuring" Musharraf. The Bush administration is already doing it and not getting far. Indeed, excessive public pressure could backfire, making any Pakistani cooperation against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban appear to be the action of an American stooge.

Instead of tough public posturing, a more thoughtful American approach would focus on efforts to help Pakistanis become more prosperous, secure and democratic -- therefore less likely to support extremism in the first place. A first step in such an approach would be for Washington to complement military aid to Pakistan with more economic and humanitarian assistance. Pakistanis resent the fact that most American dollars end up in the hands of the military and security services, and in the long run, better opportunities for the country's people would eliminate extremism. Greater Western openness to imports from Pakistan, financial support for its failing public education system and job-creating development assistance would do more to wean Pakistan's large youth population away from extremism than any amount of diplomatic pressure or the threat of military force.

The US must also support a transition to democratic rule. Tolerating Musharraf's ongoing military dictatorship would be a

debatable proposition if the US were getting impeccable cooperation on terrorism, but is less compelling when that cooperation is half-hearted. Indeed it is ironic that President Bush -- who so forcefully argued that US support for dictators in the Muslim world is the primary cause for extremism there -- fails to see that dynamic taking place today. In a range of discussions with Pakistani students, journalists, politicians and policy experts, I found almost no one willing to support the increasingly authoritarian general and much anger directed at the US for backing him. The last few months in Pakistan have seen the abrupt removal of the Supreme Court chief justice and his subsequent reinstatement, the killing of some 40 protesters in Karachi, the murder of another Supreme Court official, an aborted attempt to stifle independent television stations and a general strike -- precisely the string of explosive events that Bush argues produce "stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export," that his

democracy-promotion doctrine was supposedly designed to avoid. Some fear that democratically elected leaders in Pakistan would be less ready to support the US. That fear is not entirely misplaced, but it understates the leverage Washington would have over those leaders and overlooks the fact that their actions would have more legitimacy in Pakistani eyes than anything done by the current regime. It also misses the point that, in the long run, repression will create more terrorists than the government could ever arrest or kill. Islamist parties in Pakistan have never done well in free elections, and they would not win if such elections were held today. But if Musharraf ends up clinging to power through repression rather than elections, support for Islamic extremism, as the only alternative, could rise.

If we really want to address a major source of extremism emanating from Pakistan, the US should use the current period of relative calm between Pakistan and India --

and the leverage derived from its growing partnership with India -- to launch a new diplomatic effort on the disputed region of Kashmir. A deal -- in which the current "line of control" in Kashmir becomes a recognised border between India and Pakistan and the Muslim areas of Kashmir constitute a special zone within India -- could form the basis for peace between the two nuclear neighbours. The proposed deal could provide for significant autonomy within both the Indian and Pakistani-controlled parts of Kashmir, the creation of a consultative group that would include Kashmiris, Pakistanis, Indians and perhaps others, as well as the gradual demilitarisation of the region.

Such a step toward peace -- supported diplomatically and financially by the international community -- would make it possible for Musharraf to shut down the many Pakistani extremist groups for which Kashmir is the raison d'être, and further undermine the perceived Pakistani need for a Taliban client in

Afghanistan. It would also facilitate badly needed economic and energy cooperation from Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan. So by all means, the US must continue to focus on Afghanistan and devote the resources necessary to succeed there. But the US cannot neglect Pakistan, which is ultimately the greater potential problem. Helping it overcome its vast domestic challenges, and giving Pakistanis a more hopeful future, would do more for the war on terror than any number of new troops next door.

Philip H. Gordon is Senior Fellow for US Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution. His latest book, *Winning the Right War: The Path to Security for America and the World*, will be released August 21.

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