

Giving the police the wherewithal

A step in the right direction

THE government's decision to make an allocation of Tk. 18 crore in the 2007-08 fiscal year as funds for the police to bear the cost of investigations certainly goes some way toward meeting their requirement. Alongside this, the provision of 30 per cent of their basic salary as allowances for traffic policemen clearly argues the case for greater efficiency on their part. All of this goes towards fulfillment of a long-felt need on the part of the police department.

As the record shows so amply, all cases of investigation by the police, especially matters relating to a perpetration of criminality, were in the past hamstrung by a lack of funds. It was not surprising to hear of policemen paying from their own pockets or even sometimes resorting to dubious means of coming by money to pursue cases. Such a situation will hopefully now come to an end and make the work of the police that much easier.

There can be no question that police investigations often involve a long, elaborate process of action. Cash-strapped investigations cannot be expected to yield positive results. In investigations of criminal cases, locating witnesses and getting them to cooperate, nabbing suspects and bringing them within the ambit of the law, recovering bodies and having them undergo autopsies are some of the steps the police are required to take. All of these are not only difficult but also monetarily exacting tasks. Additionally, when all such work earlier had to be done by the police without any financial back-up from the department or the government, there was a natural inclination on the part of investigating policemen to slacken their activities. In the process, it was the people directly affected by crime who suffered. One other drawback of investigations -- and that again owing largely to a lack of adequate funds -- has been a prevalence of bias and a lack of propriety involved in them. These drawbacks have all too often weakened the prosecution of crime.

The move to provide funds for police investigations into crime as also allowances for traffic policemen from now on can, therefore, be looked upon as steps in the right direction. On the one hand, the police will now be expected to move with alacrity in discharging their responsibilities. On the other, as a result of such quick movement, the police will be able to find clues more effectively than they have been able to until now. A provision of investigation-related funds should enable the police to move more speedily into preserving and collecting evidence of crime. On the whole, the police from here on ought to start raising the quality of the work they do.

Woes of Old Dhaka

DESA, WASA should pay attention

OVER the past 72 hours water supply in the old part of the city has sharply declined. WASA authorities have attributed this shortage to inadequate power supply. The Executive Engineer of WASA has confirmed that in order to operate each of the pumps in the locality the required supply has to be 400MW whereas only 350MW is available. We fail to understand as to why the situation cannot be improved since power generation is at a record level this year as recently reported in the local media compared to last year.

Whatever might be the causes for the reduction in supply, the truth remains that a large section of the city's population in the old Dhaka continues to suffer. Worst of all, as reported, students and teachers of many residential educational institutions are also suffering due to acute shortage of water, apart from the power outages. Several hundred resident students of Badrunessa Womens' College, Eden College and the Home Economics College are living in distress.

Water and power supplies have long been problematic for the residents of old Dhaka and its adjoining areas perhaps more than in other parts of the city. People of these parts are the oldest residents of the city; not only that they also happen to be economically active part of the city's populace. As it is they have somewhat neglected and it is time they received due attention from DESA, WASA, let alone Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) itself by way of alleviating poor drainage and water-logging conditions in the area.

We eagerly await some dynamism and real action on the ground by all the concerned agencies of the government in active cooperation with the local ward commissioners.



ZAFAR SOBHAN

STRAIGHT TALK

Today's China is different from the China of the past, but the Chinese do not feel that the societal and cultural transformations they are going through make them any less Chinese. Nor does it. They are merely coming to terms, with as much grace as is manageable, with the 21st century. Bangladesh would do well to do the same.

buildings, with peeling paint and dusty windows, in parts of Kunming, but these were more similar to council estates in Europe or projects in the US than to the squalid slums of the third world. They were drab and depressed but not cess-pools of disease and despair.

In both cities I visited, cranes dotted the sky-line, glass and steel sky-scrappers as well as high-quality brick and cement structures of charm and grace were everywhere to be seen, all the streets were metalled and paved and in superb condition, there were no mud or dirt roads or make-shift bamboo or tin shacks.

Everything was cheap. Everything worked. There were no crowds anywhere. Trees and parks and promenades abounded. Traffic was smooth and orderly. The cities were well-planned and easy to navigate. There were many nice places to go and an atmosphere and environment conducive to doing so.

What I found were sparkling clean, spacious, visually stunning, absolutely modern metropolises, with wide, well-paved, uncrowded boulevards and avenues, and attractive, well-constructed apartment buildings. The shopping and central business districts could have been anywhere in Europe or North America.

Sure, there were some depressed parts of the cities: block after block of smoke and ash coloured cement and cinder-block public housing complexes in parts of Dalian, and smaller, more cramped, more dingy apartment

them go by in the street. They were friendly, open, and helpful. No English, of course, but they tried their best. One armchair dissident I sat next to on one of my flights was perfectly happy to share, at some length and considerable wit, his decidedly low opinion of his government. The young people, specially, were no different from their counterparts anywhere else in the world. The notion of China as a world apart has to be rethought.

From the point of view of Bangladesh, China is a massive success story. Moving so many millions out of poverty and so many from rural to urban areas is a staggering achievement. In countries such as ours there is no more crucial challenge than to ensure a decent standard of living for the millions below the poverty line, and in this regard there is surely much for us to learn from China.

So what are the lessons to be learned for Bangladesh? China, I suspect, is something of a Rorschach test, with each person seeing something different and taking away a different lesson from the experience. Many, to be sure, will take away from the China miracle the lesson that developing economies need to be guided by a strong government that brooks no opposition, and that China is a shining example that economic advancement should trump individual rights and freedoms.

The young Chinese I met were almost all, to a man (and woman) open and open-minded. They read Adam Smith, watch CNN, and surf the internet. They were not shy to speak their minds and be critical of their government. They were curious about other countries. They were individuals with a fully developed sense of their individual identity and right to determine their own destinies as they themselves saw fit.

Democracy, as it is commonly understood, may take time to establish itself. But the culture of questioning and argument and dissent is alive and well. Individual freedoms are by no means absolute, but there appears to be a growing respect and demand for them. I do not think this process can or will be reversed and I think that this opening up of the Chinese



Downtown Kunming

mind will continue to propel itself forward of its own inexorable momentum. I think.

For me, the lesson to be learned from China was quite different.

For me, the most remarkable thing about China was how well it seems to have come to terms with modernity. Bangladesh and China have many of the same characteristics. We are a traditional, rural, largely agricultural society. Our pastoral culture is well developed and sophisticated. China's is no less so. It is no less ancient, no less grand, no less proud.

Nevertheless, China has recognized that it must change. And it is changing without feeling that it is compromising its age-old culture and identity. The men and women I saw on the streets were farmers and herders one generation back but have made the transition to urban life, where they work happily as shop assistants and factory workers, taxi drivers and typists. This is the brave new world.

I heard time and again that China had understood that in today's world there was no way they could raise rural incomes sufficiently, and so that in the next decade we will see the migration of 300 million from rural China to urban centres. It will be the biggest

migration in human history.

We will have to do the same.

This is the first year that the majority of the world's population is to be found in urban not rural areas.

Soon, more Bangladeshis will live in cities than in villages. This will be a difficult and wrenching transformation for us. But the Chinese have accomplished it, and created attractive and spacious cities brimming with jobs and opportunity to accommodate this transformation. We must do the same.

In China I see no hang up about moving away from ancestral values and ways of life. I see no hang up about modernity. I see no hang up about young people adopting an urban life-style. I see no hang up about people abandoning the old ways of doing things and the traditions of their fore-fathers.

Today's China is different from the China of the past, but the Chinese do not feel that the societal and cultural transformations they are going through make them any less Chinese. Nor does it. They are merely coming to terms with as much grace as is manageable, with the 21st century. Bangladesh would do well to do the same.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

An incredibly shrinking nation



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

CROSS TALK

The irony is that the entire nation has gone ahead into the past. We have folded as a nation, trapped in the motion of inertia. If we are going anywhere, we are going nowhere. If too much is happening, nothing is happening. It's much ado about nothing. It's like growing silence in the midst of clamour.

We have lost height as a nation, turning hollow in the thick of things, hope into despair, dream into nightmare. So the food is more of less nutritious, light is more of less bright, minds more of less sound, and thoughts more of less round.

We have moved backward in forward creating many contradictions. A smuggler was made the minister of home affairs. A pretender with fake credentials was appointed the judge of the High Court. And then we elected many loan defaulters to the parliament, expecting those who violated law will enact laws for us.

Well, endless erosion leads to the barebones when the clatter of the empty sounds like the fury of the full. Then these mores of less create their own distortions. The doctors behave like patients, teachers like students, professionals like novice, and old leaders walk behind their young Prince Charming.

There is abundance of depletion.

Starting from politics to culture education to moral integrity, the loss of quality is immense. There are many pockets of bankruptcy, where this nation went dry and spent like summer pools, where institutions, families and individuals have shrunk and diminished from giants to midgets, where pride is lost in prejudice, truth in lies, attention in pretension and devotion in delusion. We are an incredibly shrinking nation where growth is decay, strength is weakness, and power is incapacity.

For Voltaire the central horror of the pre-Enlightenment world was a troika, which included the triumph of obscurantism over reason, the atrophy of education and critical thinking, and the integration of fanaticism, the state and the apparatus of torture. The resulting outcome was the economic and political marginalisation of culture, which eventually led to the fall of civilisation.

In fact, to paraphrase the late US comedian Rodney Dangerfield: we don't get no respect. That is why cub secretaries from another country come to meet our head of state. Foreign diplomats busy themselves meddling in our business.

All of these are unmistakable signs of shrinking. No, the country is not losing its geographic territory. No, the population hasn't stopped

growing. The economy was growing until the recent slowdown. The real estate is booming. Number of universities is growing. More students are winning GP5 in SSC and HSC year by year. The country has more rich people than ever before.

"Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage," proclaimed Immanuel Kant. He explained that true freedom of man was to "make use of his understanding without direction from another." Then he claimed that the motto of enlightenment is to give courage to every man so that he can use his own reason.

It is the hulk in people that also makes the hulk in a nation. The people have to have more power than casting votes, torching vehicles, and killing each other. These passions come from their hunger for freedom. Rising above the clutter of corruption and narrow interests, they should be allowed to have the taste of freedom. Enlightened country needs enlightened people.

Putting two plus two, a nation is pumped up when its people are pumped up. In our political life we have miserably failed to see that equation. We have squeezed the people for so many years, leaving them flat and thin, that it is now taking its toll. The land of shrinking people is shrinking itself.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

Crisis always cripples the poor most



ABDUL BAYES

BENEATH THE SURFACE

The university is open now. The bells of the rickshaws in the early morning, on the road passing adjacent to my home, wake me up from the bed. I feel comfortable to note that Noor Muhammads on the campuses of Bangladesh would be able to earn a few bucks more than before just to help them survive the economic onslaughts.

rickshaw puller, breathing very fast and looking very weak, appeared to take me home. Rain water rolled down his head, cheeks and beard and I suspected that he could fall sick soon. At first sight, I guessed that the rickshaw puller standing before me might be aged 60 plus as reflected by his body structure and squeezed skins. But soon I was told that the rickshaw puller named Noor Muhammad was 40-45 years of age. Not a surprising observation, perhaps, as poverty makes people look awfully old at a relatively young age.

As I came to know, two sons of

Noor Muhammad also pull rickshaws on the campus for eking out a living. But they are now separated from their parents. Thus, bread earners left home to let Muhammad lean on his labour to look after the bread eaters -- two sons and his wife. This is a socio-demographic feature of the extreme poor families in Bangladesh.

However, this is not the end of the story for my puller Noor Muhammad. To add to his misery, the wife had been suffering from serious kidney ailment, and in recent years, reportedly, a total of Tk 2,000 had already been spent on her treatment. Most of the money came from debt. Again, she fell sick

and now needs Tk 500 to take her to Dhaka for specialist doctors. The two sons living with Muhammad used to go to school but now stopped going for reasons not explained to me. The only asset for Noor Muhammad is the rickshaw and his labour to feed a family of four. He lives nearby the campus in a rented one-room house. For the last one year, his family hardly ate any fish or meat. Rice with "varta" had been the daily manue for a pretty long time.

Noor Muhammad had been pulling rickshaws in JU campus for a long time. In fact, there are roughly 200 rickshaw pullers (both official and

unofficial) in the campus who are addressed as "mamas" (maternal uncle) by the students. It is true that they feel eulogised by the address but, equally true, they feel the pinch from the treatment of some students alleged to be to nagging while paying the due fare. However, before the university was closed sine die, the daily income of a rickshaw puller in the campus was Tk 100-150. With this amount, so said Noor Muhammad, he could buy roughly 4 kg of rice which he needs daily for his household consumption. Remember that a rickshaw puller needs more calories than the average norm of 2,100 as recommended by the FAO.

When I informed that the campus might be open very soon -- possibly within a few days or so -- Noor Muhammad stood erect and seemingly felt a sigh of relief. To be sure of my utterances he asked: "Is it so, sir? Are you speaking the truth? That's good news to convey to my wife. I direly need Tk 300 to take my wife to a specialist doctor very soon. I hope I can make it provided the campus is open." Meantime, from my wallet, I gave Noor Muhammad Tk 300 and said: "Go and take your wife to a doctor. You need not

have to return the money. Always take care of your health. For you, health is wealth. For others, wealth is health."

The above case study is just a tip of the iceberg. Thousands of rickshaw pullers like Muhammad might be hard hit by the closure of educational institutions all over the country. Now that the universities are open, probably, they could heal some of their economic wounds during any crisis, political or natural, the poor like Noor Muhammad suffers the most. Be it a hartial, a curfew or a deteriorating law and order situation, it is the poor who gets the worst treatment in terms of loss of income. Therefore, as far as possible, crisis should be averted for the poor's sake. The solvent can somehow tide over the crisis. But crisis cripples the poor most. We want no more crises, no more closure, and no more chaos. The opening of the universities would help the Noor Muhammads earn an income just to be on an even keel. No fish, no meat or milk, but

rice with "varta" is what they need. And we should allow them with this opportunity of unhindered transactions -- a freedom to trade commodities, labour, or other things. We should not forget that, more often than not, what is "fun" to us is a foul to them -- the millions who are crushed during political or economic crisis.

The university is open now. The bells of the rickshaws in the early morning, on the road passing adjacent to my home, wake me up from the bed. I feel comfortable to note that Noor Muhammads on the campuses of Bangladesh would be able to earn a few bucks more than before just to help them survive the economic onslaughts.

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.