

Access to higher education

Set the priorities right

It is disquieting to learn that only a little more than four percent of the students passing HSC exams every year can pursue higher education due to lack of space in the universities. Clearly, something is going awfully wrong in our overall education planning.

Not that higher education is for all and sundry. For maintaining quality and imparting higher education in the true sense of the term the need for being selective cannot be overemphasised. But it has to be compatible with our national priorities and reshaped in view of more and more students making their way up to the threshold of university education. Likewise, an emphasis pattern has to be evolved in light of the changing times and the challenges of a highly competitive modern world. We definitely need to formulate a strategy for developing human resources for achieving our development goals. A comparison with other Asian countries shows that the percentage of higher education seekers is much lower in our context.

The Chairman of the University Grants Commission has very rightly said that we need more universities to accommodate the ever-increasing number of higher education seekers. However, the education planners have to put forward some specific suggestions and an action plan to overcome the problems like acute shortage of teachers in the universities. It is no secret that the newly set-up private universities are drawing heavily on the existing resources through employing public university teachers as part timers. So introducing two or three shifts at the universities is not easy at the moment. The planners have to lay due emphasis on increasing the number of qualified teachers. Obviously, teaching has to be made a more attractive profession than it is now with research facilities provided.

There is a worry, however, about the students who get 'lost' after failing to find space in the higher education arena. We must not forget that they are the vast majority who will form the bulk of our workforce in future. It is true higher education is not for all of them, but it is also true that adequate facilities have to be created for them to eke out a living and be productive for the country. The answer lies in making them functional and employable at certain point of education. Vocational training at an affordable cost can bring the best out of them. However, it is much more than a question of setting up a few training centres. We need to have a strategy of imparting need-based education to the huge number of students who enter the job market every year.

India's thoughtful gesture

Pakistan, US, EU and other international response has been a tower of strength

PRODUCTION in the major rice exporting countries in the world has been low this year. As a result, many such countries including India had imposed export restrictions on rice to be able to meet their own deficits.

The scarcity of rice reached such a state that even with enough cash a country has had difficulty buying it. Set against the backdrop of two successive floods and cyclone Sidr, the projected rice deficit, up to June, is 31 lakh tonnes. Until November 3, the government and private sector had imported 12 lakh tonnes, leaving a deficit of 19 lakh tonnes to be met either by import or food grants. WFP has plans to feed twenty-two lakh of the affected people for six months.

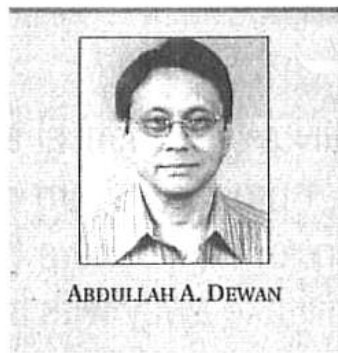
The donor community was, however, willing to pay cash to buy rice rather than provide cereals in outright grants. On a different plane, EC wanted money to be given to WFP to buy rice for us.

In such a complicated situation, Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee's announcement in Dhaka that India would export five lakh tonnes of rice to Bangladesh comes as a markedly significant gesture of goodwill and friendliness. In his words, it is as an exception to Bangladesh being in a distressful condition that India has lifted the ban on rice export, otherwise applicable to different countries. India had already waived rice export restrictions for Bangladesh by providing her with 70,000 tonnes as immediate post-cyclone relief. The other important point to note about the promised consignment of five lakh tonnes, it would be exported at cost price.

In the same spirit, we appreciate Pakistan's prompt despatch of medical team and relief goods, the UK's useful assistance package and the USA's elaborate arrangements to provide purified water and extensive medical help.

We are grateful to all of them.

Disaster aid and anti-inflationary recovery



ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

AVAILABLE statistics indicate that each year affluent nations mete out 6 to 8 million tonnes of food aid, reaching refugees, households in famine zones, and people all around the world who tread the poverty line.

Notwithstanding that the Food Aid Program (FAP) saves lives -- reaching schoolchildren who often go hungry and grow undernourished, and helpless mothers having no sources of income -- many aid experts think that food aid should be reserved only as a last resort. They favour giving cash or vouchers to the vulnerable instead, arguing that FAP can disrupt domestic markets and hold back recovery from a crisis.

Proponents of this view argue that hunger exists not because of lack of availability of food -- it exists because of lack of income and accelerating post-disaster price hikes. They often suggest that the prevailing FAP often advances the petty interests of donors instead of the cause of the disaster victims.

NO NONSENSE

FWP, if properly organised and maintained, would be strongly anti-inflationary, since the outcome is the production of real goods and services without increasing the money supply -- and better yet, infrastructure rebuilding would offer a stream of real services in the foreseeable future. The Bangladesh Bank's release of \$180 million from its reserve for import of foodstuff is also anti-inflationary, since it is tantamount to currency sterilisation -- an equivalent amount of Bangladesh currency, in the process, will find its home in the vault of the central Bank.

For example, when California raisin producers were having problems in 2003, raisins were included among the food aid the US gave the WFP. And then there's the dilemma of rich countries donating surplus food to subsidise their own farmers.

Food aid may disrupt domestic markets in at least two obvious ways:

First, stuffing the markets with cheap food causes prices to fall, which helps the needy food buyers but hurts local farmers, depriving them of the fair price of their produce. This has an unplanned effect on the whole agricultural sector. For example, say rice prices drop and people start buying rice instead of wheat. Then wheat farmers endure hardships.

Second, late arrival of food aids disrupts the market for the next season's harvest, making it difficult for local farmers to pull through. This happened in Malawi in 2002, and also became a problem in Niger in 2005.

An alternative for FAP is cash or vouchers, allowing the disaster

stricken people to buy their daily essentials, including food, soap, kerosene or whatever else they need most, even if they've lost their sources of making a living.

The Rome-based UN World Food Program (WFP) channels the most significant emergency food aid, although some governments donate large amounts of food bypassing the WFP. The US is by far the biggest donor, providing more than half of global food aid. Canada, Japan, Australia and the European Union countries are also major contributors to the food aid bank.

Although WFP prefers emergency and disaster aid in hard cash, a lot of donations are pledged "in kind," like food from donor countries -- about 75% of all food aid in 2004 was directly dispersed in this way. Plausibly, cash donations have a cascading effect -- buy food locally or from neighbouring countries to help the needy with spillover effect of boosting local economies.

Food aid is sometimes distributed in development projects --

hungry people work on infrastructure building in exchange for food -- the widely known Food for Work Program (FWP).

But some experts are less enthusiastic about FWP, which they deem to be patronising, and difficult to organise and maintain; instead they favour cash and food vouchers. Another argument against FWP is the uncertainty of its continuance if the food aid dries up. This has happened in several Latin American countries.

As noted above, many governments channel large amounts of food directly to NGOs, either in emergencies or for development projects. For example, as of November 27, Usaid has pledged to contribute more than \$10 million under the Food for Peace program for post-Sidr relief and recovery efforts.

The aid package includes more than 3,000 tons of Food for Peace assistance as part of Care and Save the Children grants provided through Usaid. The US, additionally, has provided more than \$14.4 million in emergency funds, com-

modities and transportation to assist relief efforts.

Most food experts posit that food aid has limited effectiveness unless it targets the most needy -- especially women and children. It is also time consuming, and may often reach the distressed weeks or months after the most crucial period.

When natural disasters like Cyclone Sidr strike, helping the dispossessed and the dying becomes the overriding considerations -- there is little time to think about how best to utilise the cash donations for the benefit of the victims and the economy. This is especially important for an economy where scourge of price spirals of daily essentials have already dried up the buying capacity of fixed income consumers.

Under the unabated price spiraling environment in Bangladesh (inflation in double digits), this article argues in favour of direct food assistance imported from donor countries, FWP, and a minimum amount of cash handouts to buy non-food essentials.

Food items coming from outside the country would put downward pressure on inflation by offsetting shortages -- while buying those from local markets for donations purposes by foreign donors add further inflationary pressure on items already in short supply, and also adds to the already staggering money supply (through converting, say dollars to taka), inducing further demand pull inflationary pressure.

The recently proposed

Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) program to begin next month should not be run by buying food items from the domestic market. Cash donations should be used for repair and rebuilding of housing and infrastructure with locally produced construction materials, which will rejuvenate the construction sector and generate employment and income.

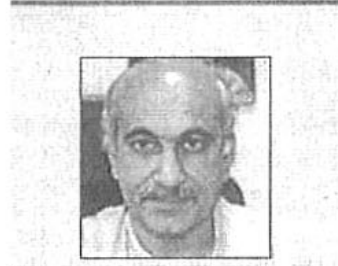
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The Bangladesh Bank's release of \$180 million from its reserve for import of foodstuff is also anti-inflationary, since it is tantamount to currency sterilisation -- an equivalent amount of Bangladesh currency, in the process, will find its home in the vault of the central Bank. Any taxes levied on interest income from savings and fixed deposits to finance disaster recovery would have very little anti-inflationary effect.

By being prudent in its fiscal operations, the government can soundly rehabilitate the dispossessed victims of Cyclone Sidr while avoiding further demand pressure on the already inflationary economy.

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Musharraf's tailor



M.J. AKBAR

SURELY the most creative, lucrative and sensitive job in Pakistan is held by Pervez Musharraf's tailor. Think of the number of objectives he has to meet: the internal and external security of his nation; the legitimacy of his country's political system; the wooing of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif; and the awesome American strategic goal of short-term security and long-term stability that hinges on the cut of the cloth. After all this, he still has to ensure that the president looks good. Not easy.

The tailor has had some practice. This is not the first time that President Musharraf has chosen civvies for public display. He put them on during his brief interventions into pseudo-politics even when in uniform, as when he chose to address a public rally in order to indicate the love and warmth that the Pakistani people had for him.

He appeared then in a shalwar-kameez. His style was different from the precedent set by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who gave his party, the Pakistan People's Party, a virtual uniform distinguished by a braid in the collar of the jacket. The other

BYLINE

Internal questions can be even trickier. A Parliament elected the president. Can the next, elected, Parliament remove the president from office? The President of India can be impeached under Article 61, if two-thirds of either House of Parliament prefer a charge, and then, after investigation and a process of trial, hold him or her guilty by a two-thirds margin.

difference was that Pervez Musharraf did not look all that relaxed as he waved his arms in acknowledgement of the people's cheers. Maybe the cheerleaders had exacted too heavy a price.

Thomas Carlyle, the 18th century British philosopher, argued that clothes made the man. He was discussing more than one nuance of this proposition, including the measure of appearance and folds of reality. He had the advantage of thinking within the confines of an ordered system.

Musharraf's tailor may have changed his boss's clothes. But has he changed his boss's mind, or indeed his boss's constituency?

Musharraf has imposed martial law, declared an emergency, sacked 12 judges of the Supreme Court, imprisoned the non-compliant, and struck deals with America and Saudi Arabia in order to remain in power. Why should we imagine that he would suddenly surrender power just because he has surrendered his uniform?

That surely is a key question as Pakistan moves to the next act of a drawn-out tragi-comedy. An election will be held in January. A prime minister will be sworn in. Who will be in power? The old president or

the new prime minister?

So far, there has been no confusion under dictators. All prime ministers appointed by Musharraf knew their place, somewhere in the middle of the food chain, after the Corps Commanders and preferred political heavyweights who had backed the president.

Shaukat Aziz is not disappointed that his sell-by date has arrived. The job was a lottery, and like all windfalls it had a finite existence. He did what he could, to the best of his ability, and did not confuse his years in office with the sanction of popular support. He was a top bureaucrat in the banking industry; he became a top bureaucrat in the political industry. Good luck, and goodbye.

The queue of potential prime ministers for January 2008 is full of professional politicians who demand obedience rather than give it. Pakistan had enough problems with a single source of authority, an army dictator who ruled by decree. How will it manage with a dual source of authority?

Whoever thought up this duality (one hears that the idea belongs to Washington) either had a facile brain, or had never visited Pakistan, or had just run out of

ideas and could not think of anything else. The American plan aims, as we have noted, to achieve short-term security by pleasing both God and mammon, by partitioning governance into military and civilian departments in which the armed forces will continue to confront those who challenge America in Afghanistan, or indeed America in America, while the civilians get on with the business of economic growth, prosperity-management, foreign policy and, doubtless, madrasa-eradication. This can be dressed up as a democracy, and voila! All problems are hereby declared over!

Pakistan has had to pay a heavy price for the delusion of its dictators. To this we must now add the self-delusion of its advisers.

A conventional democracy draws very clear lines between a president and a prime minister; one of the two designations is assigned the power, and the second plays a secondary, complementary role. In France, the president is the chief executive, and the prime minister is a subsidiary executive.

In India, the prime minister is the undisputed authority. The Indian president is a creature of the government as much as the

Constitution, whose every public pronouncement is vetted and cleared by the cabinet. His -- or, today, her's -- only moment of supreme authority is in the exercise of a Constitutional duty, in the selection and swearing-in of a prime minister and his/her government.

The moment the government is sworn in, the president becomes, in effect, a Constitutional prisoner of his own government, a situation that lasts only as long as the government has a parliamentary majority or its term is over. The president is a Constitutional bridgehead.

Did President Musharraf become president in order to become a cipher? Anyone who thinks the answer is yes needs a long, private chat with, possibly, Musharraf's tailor.

A variation of the Turkey model, in which the armed forces placed themselves within the executive system as guarantors of the nation's secularism, is being attempted. In Pakistan's case, the armed forces are the guarantors of security. But there is no doubt about which finger is on the trigger. It is not a civilian finger.

I have no doubt that the January elections in Pakistan will be free and fair, since those who rig the elections have already been elected. The people are being asked to choose only one centre of power in a bipolar system.

This leaves us with some serious questions about both foreign and internal policy. Who deals with India in the diarchy that is envisaged for Pakistan from January 2008? Who deals with Afghanistan?

Who makes the trips to the White House? Will every discussion have to be repeated to two centres of powers, and each agreement sold twice?

Internal questions can be even trickier. A Parliament elected the president. Can the next, elected, Parliament remove the president from office? The President of India can be impeached under Article 61, if two-thirds of either House of Parliament prefer a charge, and then, after investigation and a process of trial, hold him or her guilty by a two-thirds margin.

Is the president of Pakistan above any system of accountability, free to do anything he wishes? Will the president of Pakistan declare another emergency, abolish Parliament, pack off any judges of the Supreme Court if he feels threatened? This year's repackaging of the Supreme Court was a pre-emptive strike, not a post facto decision. Is there any reason why it could not happen again?

You cannot get long-term stability if there are too many questions and not enough answers. There is a basic geological fault in the system if the directly elected portion of the diarchy is the weaker of the two poles in a bipolar polity. When asked, recently, when he would step down, President Pervez Musharraf answered: "When there is no turmoil in Pakistan".

By that yardstick he could still be Pakistan's president in 2007, if the Almighty gives him a long-enough life. And there could be more work for the tailor.

M.J. Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

The Sunni civil war

In Baghdad's Ameriyah neighborhood, another Sunni stronghold, the Islamic Party just repainted and reopened its local office, which had been blown up by Al Qaeda. It's festooned with banners and flags but forlorn inside, where party officials have signed up only 65 members in the neighborhood of 25,000 residents.

LARRY KAPLOW and ROD NORDLAND

THE men who shot up Faisal Mohammed Ali's village couldn't have been more conspicuous. "They were all wearing their orange vests," says the 54-year-old teacher, referring to the uniforms of locals enlisted in the fight against Al Qaeda. The US-sponsored fighters have excelled at pursuing terrorists in Arab Jabour, a notoriously violent area south of Baghdad.

But Ali and others say that after a roadside bomb killed two of their comrades in October, the gunmen killed five men from a rival clan in cold blood and torched several houses. The Americans say the victims died in a firefight, but acknowledge the militia has sometimes gone after rival tribes. That's

a familiar scenario in Iraq. In this case, though, all sides are Sunni.

Reconciliation in Iraq is most often portrayed as a matter of bringing Shiites and Sunnis together. But there are deep divisions within the Sunni community as well -- between the new tribal levies and old politicians, Baathists and anti-Baathists, fundamentalist mosque-goers and secular elements. Shiite leaders warn they can't be expected to find common ground with Sunnis who cannot find it among themselves. "We have been asking them to unify their front and be a full-fledged partner in the process of dialogue and reconciliation, but we cannot get a true partner," says Saad Yousif al-Muttalibi, an adviser to the Shiite leadership.

Ironically, success is fueling some of the internal squabbles.

The militias in America's Concerned Local Citizens program now include more than 65,000 orange-vested fighters, many of them former insurgents. They rightly claim credit for quelling violence across Iraq, and want their voices heard.

"They say, 'Hey, we've stopped fighting. We've come halfway,'" says Col. Martin Stanton, a coordinator of the groups for the US military. "We want into the ... government." But there are already Sunnis on the inside, such as the Iraqi Islamic Party, which is led by exiles who opposed Saddam's regime and joined the US-crafted political system early.

They're used to speaking for Iraq's Sunnis, and control the local governments (and more important, their budgets) in Sunni-dominated areas like Anbar province. The stresses between the old guard and new are sharpest in Anbar, the Sunni heartland.

During the summer the Anbar provincial council was expanded to give the former insurgents about one-fifth of the seats. That has only given the two sides a new forum in which to argue. Last month, at a conference to discuss how to spend public-works money in Anbar, the Sunni tribesmen angrily accused their rivals of monopolizing projects and pulled out of the council. "We are demanding our own share," says Ahmed Abu Risha, the tribes' most prominent leader. He threatens a wave of street demonstrations to force the creation of a new council.

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"We are part of the political process and we have always been dealing with the Americans," says party activist Moqdad al-Ani. "But others see us as traitors."

Ameriyah now belongs to militia leader Abu Abed and his American-backed gunmen. When Newsweek visited Abu Abed last week, he was surrounded by swagging guards decked out with the black gloves, shades and kneepads worn by foreign security contractors. He mocked the Islamic Party for "running away" from Al Qaeda, and accuses it of trying to take credit for his men's success on the battlefield.

Like many Iraqis, he wants nothing to do with the current crop of political parties. "It's too early to say" who should represent Sunnis in the government, he says.

At least the tribals and the politicians are arguing over political representation, rather than shooting at each other like the Sunnis of Arab Jabour. But that could change if there's no political progress. Sunni politicians are wary of compromising on matters



like the release of Sunni prisoners and amnesty for former Baathists, lest they be painted as sellouts by their Sunni rivals.

Shiite leaders aren't above playing one Sunni camp off another; last week Prime Minister

Nuri al-Maliki tried to appoint an Anbar tribal loyalist to a cabinet seat that had been slated for someone from the mainstream Sunni parties. "Everybody is betting on violence to sort everything out. That psychology has to be

changed," says Sunni Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi. The last thing Iraq needs is another civil war.

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