

## Arrest of relief seekers in Barguna

Recurrence must be avoided

**W**HEN twelve individuals were arrested in Barguna the other day, their fault being a demand for relief for an outlying village affected by cyclone Sidr, it couldn't but create some revulsion. The fact of the matter is that these men, part of a 500-strong procession asking that they be provided with help were a peaceful lot simply trying to draw attention to their plight.

It does not make anyone happy, indeed it is appalling, that such men in distress and in dire need of help should be taken into custody under the emergency rules. What bigger emergency can there be than the helplessness of citizens struggling to rebuild their lives after nature has left them battered? It is our belief that the measures taken against these suffering people were an over-reaction reflecting the way local authorities may sometimes adopt in handling such humanitarian crises. What these villagers were doing was only sounding an SOS, a message they intended to convey to the District Commissioner that even after a fortnight of Sidr not much of relief has reached them.

Actually, the spirit of the approach taken by the district officials and Navy personal to the demonstrators at the end of the day assuring them of the release of the arrested persons and distributing ten kg of rice should have been adopted at the beginning of the event. They should have been allowed to present their memorandum to the DC for appropriate follow up action without any incident. Those who were arrested should be allowed to go free, if they have not been freed already.

Our sympathies certainly go out to all the men and women who were compelled by circumstances to draw attention of the authorities to sufferings even as other cyclone-affected places in the country came under the spotlight of relief operations. For the local administration, everywhere in the country, the emphasis ought not to be on invoking laws that have little to do with people's hunger but instead should be on finding out how many more villages and how many more people are yet deprived of the bare means of survival in these post-Sidr conditions to be reached with succour expeditiously.

## Making EC independent

We support it wholeheartedly

**T**HE council of advisers has asked the law ministry to further scrutinize the independent election commission secretariat draft ordinance-2007, the objective of which is to make the EC fully independent. We hope the law ministry will soon place a well formulated draft of the ordinance before the council of advisers, thus paving the way for the EC to emerge as a truly independent body, both structurally and functionally.

By all indications, the ordinance will ensure separation of the EC from the PMO or the present chief adviser's office, which of course will resolve to a great extent the problem of the commission being influenced by the government of the day. Such unwanted influence was no doubt the biggest obstacle in the way of conducting free and fair elections. It has also transpired that the EC will have complete control over its budget and the process of appointing its employees. This will ensure a neutral administrative set-up at the EC.

As for its accountability, we believe the EC should be answerable to the parliament through the standing committee on law and parliamentary affairs ministry.

However, the point that must not be missed here is that the EC's independence will primarily depend on the commitment of the political government of the day towards upholding it. The government will have to prove their neutrality and strict compliance with the rules of fair play in appointing the chief election commissioner and the commissioners. The CEC and his team members will have to be persons of integrity capable of resisting any interference from the government that might undermine the EC's independence.

Independence and functional autonomy of the EC are an essential prerequisite for making elections free and fair. Hindsight should pretty much convince us that it is an issue where there is absolutely no scope for any compromise.

The political parties which fought long-drawn battles in the past on holding of elections acceptable to all the stakeholders must have learnt by this time that the attempts at getting undue advantage as a ruling party, a charge they face so often, backfired when the electoral process lost its credibility through wrongful appointments of CEC and election commissioners.

## Need for national austerity



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

### BY THE NUMBERS

**R**ehabilitation of the cyclone-hit people is not the only crisis for Bangladesh. Its oil dependent economy is bracing itself for the worst, with the oil prices skyrocketing in the international market. The oil price, which was \$70 a barrel in July, is now \$100 a barrel. Bangladesh spent \$20 billion to import oil last year, with huge subsidy from the national exchequer.

Razed to the ground. Rural infrastructures were also badly damaged, with destruction of 1,654 bridges and culverts and 848 kilometers of road.

The country's shrimp farms and frozen food industry, the second largest foreign currency earner, were severely ravaged by Sidr, and suffered a loss of Tk 250 crore. The cyclone destroyed 800 cattle farms and 2,000 poultry farms, causing a loss of Tk 300 crore. Apart from the losses caused by the cyclone, shrimp exporters are facing another Tk 150 crore loss due to drastic fall in prices and demand in the international markets. Shrimp farmers and the cattle and poultry farms owners need help to recover from the loss caused by Sidr.

Colossal damage was also caused to the world's largest mangrove forest, the Sundarban, as the cyclone first hit the forest. Over a million people living in and around the Sundarban depend on this forest for their livelihood. Two consecutive floods and Cyclone Sidr caused the internal shock, while the external shock resulted from price hike of oil and food grains in the international market.

The combined loss to assets and output caused by floods

tance to start their life afresh.

More than 10.6 million people live in the coastal belt of the country. But there are 2,168 cyclone shelters that can provide shelter to only 1.5 million people. Only 3,976 cyclone shelters were built till the mid-nineties. Out of these 1,576 were damaged by river erosion or were abandoned due to their dilapidated condition.

Experts have already suggested that a minimum of 3,000 more cyclone shelters need to be built in the coastal belt. The lack of adequate number of cyclone shelters was one of the main reasons behind so many deaths. The country's sluggish economy is facing major shocks simultaneously from the internal and external sides for the first time in its history.

Two consecutive floods and Cyclone Sidr caused the internal shock, while the external shock resulted from price hike of oil and food grains in the international market.

The oil price, which was \$70 a barrel in July, is now \$100 a barrel.

stands at \$1.4 billion. Though the economic loss wrought by terrible Cyclone Sidr is yet to be assessed, primary estimates reveal that it will be billions of dollars. The government badly needs to import 10 lakh tons of rice against the backdrop of huge crop loss due to the deadly cyclone.

To recover from the fallout of floods and cyclone is really a big challenge for this interim government. The donor countries and agencies have so far pledged over \$550 million assistance for the cyclone-hit areas. The donors are also pledging more assistance. But the government needs huge funds for both short and long term rehabilitation of nearly 69 lakh people who have lost all their means of livelihood.

Rehabilitation of the cyclone-hit people is not the only crisis for Bangladesh. Its oil dependent economy is bracing itself for the worst, with the oil prices skyrocketing in the international market.

The oil price, which was \$70 a barrel in July, is now \$100 a barrel.

Bangladesh spent \$20 billion to import oil last year, with huge subsidy from the national exchequer. The recent oil price hike has given the government the critical choice of whether to adjust prices at the risk of a knock-on effect on boro cultivation, or to keep it unadjusted, bearing more loss.

The urgent need of the hour for the government is to announce a national austerity program to check all unnecessary spending in government offices in a bid to address the sudden pressure on the economy due to natural calamities and persisting price hike of oil in the international market.

The government announced a 16-point austerity program in September 2005 to address the crisis due to oil price hike. The major austerity measures included cutbacks on fuel consumption by the ministers and government officers, curtailing of foreign trips by senior government officials, and ban on purchase of new vehicles from the revenue budget.

It also proposed that shops, markets and roadside billboards consuming huge electricity should be switched off at 8.00 pm, and lights on one side of the streets should also be switched off at night as a part of the austerity measures.

The extravagant way in which the government and autonomous

bodies have been working over many years has frequently been a cause of embarrassment for the nation. For a resource-constrained country, it often makes a mockery of our economic conditions when a big delegation travels abroad on any trifling occasion.

Austerity ought not to be confined only to the matter of restriction of the foreign visits of high government officials. Government functionaries, and even members of their families, use vehicles beyond their allotted number and time. This should be stopped forthwith in order to curb the misuse of fuel.

The government also announced a 16-point austerity program in August 2004 for rehabilitation of the flood-ravaged economy of the country. The calls for austerity have often been made before, only to end up without any substantial benefit. Certainly, such an ostentatious austerity will do nothing.

Of course, there are many areas where the government can easily cut down on spending. Unless the government becomes serious about austerity, adopting stringent measures to slash down all unnecessary expenses to overcome the fallout of floods, cyclone, and oil price, it may leave people infuriated as their sufferings have been intensified.

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

## Streamlining the NGOs

**T**he government must realise that NGOs, in the overall context, have contributed substantially to our development efforts. There are certainly some bad eggs in the basket, however, that does not warrant throwing away the entire basket.

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

**T**HE roots of the current controversies about some of the NGOs can be traced back to the early days of the emergence of our independence. NGOs of all forms and dimensions began operating in our relatively ruined economy and infrastructure caused by the War of Liberation and the devastating cyclone of 1970.

Numerous international NGOs, many of them funded by western organisations, began to pour in as humanitarian organisations engaged in emergency relief and rehabilitation for the displaced persons, including Bengalis who took refuge in India. Most of these organisations were operated and managed by foreign nationals.

These NGOs, for a number of years, also served as windows of employment opportunities for the people of the impoverished, war-ravaged country. Until about the early eighties, there was hardly any supervision or accountability of their operations. By then, however, they had become recognised agents of development, with a powerful grip on the lives and living of the rural population of the country.

About this time, the NGO Bureau was established, which aimed at coordinating and regulating the operations of the NGOs and making them accountable. Right from the beginning, the Bureau was a weak organisation.

One of the main objectives of creating the Bureau was to make it a one-stop service organisation. The NGOs were getting weary of

bureaucratic entanglements in their operations, but the Bureau failed to deliver, and began to be viewed as yet another stumbling block in their operations. Getting approval for their project proposals, and the releasing of foreign funds etc. remained a quagmire.

To begin with, the status and the strength of the organisation were weak. The scope of work of the Bureau demanded that it be headed by a person with the rank and status of a secretary to the government.

Furthermore, the staff selected to work for the Bureau consisted of officials co-opted from various departments and ministries, with no previous knowledge and experience of NGO operations.

Moreover, at least to my knowledge, right through the mid-nineties, the Bureau was not only understaffed but also began to be recognised more as a stumbling block than a facilitator by the majority of the NGOs.

Despite the fact that the declared objective behind its creation was to cut the red tape, nothing changed. The inadequate staff strength coupled with poor professionalism gave rise to a number of problems, which ultimately became endemic in nature, and that is why today the government is finding it difficult to deal with various contentious concerning the NGOs.

The Bureau began to receive hundreds of project proposals and routine operational reports from NGOs, which it was incapable of even merely reading through, leave alone reviewing or analysing them for assessing suitability and

compatibility in relation to the overall goal of our development strategies. Thus, the pressures from both donors and the NGOs mounted, and the Bureau decided to let things go.

This situation led the NGOs to gang up behind the supporting donor agencies. For obvious reasons, the concerned donor agencies decided to support their protégés. There were two major reasons for this. First, the NGOs had turned themselves into agents for rural development, and for the donor agencies it was far less cumbersome to channel funds through the NGOs than into governmental projects.

Second, the donor agencies found or viewed the NGOs as lesser evils compared to government operated projects, at least in terms of corruption and the trickle-down effects of benefits reaching the targeted beneficiaries at ground level. NGOs soon became blue-eyed boys of the donor agencies. As much as the NGOs were hungry for funds the donor agencies also found it convenient to flush funds through them and meet the quotas fixed by the respective governments.

There were yet other reasons for the donor agencies to have preference for the NGOs over government managed projects. The NGOs were able to create a high visibility factor at ground level, where governmental interventions in "immediate" poverty alleviation activities were almost non-existent. NGOs were, and are, also good at producing sleek project proposals, including completion reports thereof.

However, because of donor pressure and the government, the NGOs began to turn themselves into local NGOs having local Boards of Management, particularly during the '90s.

In this process, the NGOs consolidated their position and managed to cut off further from governmental supervision and gain "unbridled" freedom of operations, and were rendered unaccountable for their operations. This was done in a most subtle way. Most of the Boards of Management consisted of "likeminded" people chosen from the NGO community itself, and even from ex-staff members.

Against the backdrop of the above, a handful of large and mid-level NGOs began to view themselves as powerful entities in the national context.

The main bulk of the NGOs, however, continued to work amongst the rural poor, yet never losing sight of their individual power bases in the society. It may be relevant here to mention that today most of the top ten executives of mid-level and large NGOs are some of the most well to do people in this country. Once asked, an NGO executive once told me "you need not be poor to serve the poor." How convenient!

Let us now look at the most recent study report of Transparency International of Bangladesh (TIB). Having taken into cognisance the merits and demerits of the report, particularly in respect of indulgence in corruption and lack of transparency of operations of the NGOs, the burden of guilt also lies on the shoulders of successive past governments. Besides, while carrying out the survey, and subsequent preparation of its report, TIB overlooked the fact that, all said and done, NGOs are a recognised

window of excellence in rural development interventions in the country, whether by default or otherwise. They are a factor in our development strategies, and are here to stay. They happen to be a globally recognised phenomenon.

### What the government needs to do

To begin with, the government must realise, and work from the premise, that the so-called violators are only a handful of individuals. There should be no collective harassment of the rest of the NGOs. To that extent, it was wrong to raid the offices of Proshika couple of years back, and that too without the explicit backing of credible intelligence information, as evidenced by the results of the raids.

The government must realise that NGOs, in the overall context, have contributed substantially to our development efforts. There are certainly some bad eggs in the basket, however, that does not warrant throwing away the entire basket.

The government, therefore, needs to act more prudently. As one sees it, the following measures are warranted:

- Review all business and profit making enterprises, and recommend ways and means of streamlining their operations in line with the government's laid down procedures applicable to other parallel enterprises in the public and the private sector.
- NGOs should be barred from participating in partisan politics of the country directly or indirectly, and from indulging in activities that have the remotest possibility of influencing the people living in the areas of their operations, particularly during the time of national elections.
- Last but not least in importance, the tasks serialised above should be carried out by an independent commission, which will submit its recommendations and findings to the highest authority of the government. The commission should be a high-powered one headed by no less than a retired judge of the High Court. The number of members of the commission should not exceed nine.

While one of the members could be the Director General of the NGO Affairs Bureau, other members should include a senior economist of the country, a senior member from the legal profession, and so on and so forth. The chairman of the commission should take extreme care to ensure that the concerned individuals are independent in their social and political standings.

Shamsur Chowdhury is a contributor to The Daily Star.

## BIDS and "fast-research"



**T**HE Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) is observing 50 years as the pioneer institution of research in Bangladesh. The then Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) -- a precursor -- was established in 1957. On behalf of the countrymen, I take the privilege of congratulating my colleagues at BIDS on this jubilant occasion. En passant, my acquaintance with BIDS dates back to the 1970s, when I was a Masters student at Dhaka University and a

### BENEATH THE SURFACE

**I**n this context, we can possibly suggest that the government create a special fund for this institution and provide full-autonomy so that it can regain its lost heritage in the realm of social sciences research in the country. As Mr. Sayeduzzaman (former minister for finance) opined, Bangladesh Bank could also divert a small drop of its annual profit towards BIDS so that it can serve as a catalyst in its own right.

regular visitor to its rich library.

The country had just gained independence then, and there was need for a lot of research for the rehabilitation of the war-ravaged economy and pathways out of poverty. At that time, the institute was located at Adamjee Court, Motijheel.

This citadel of research used to attract a lot of brilliant students of our time. Dr. A. Ghafur, Abu Abdullah, S.R. Osmani, Mahabub Hossain, Abu Abdullah, whose name and fame crossed the frontiers of Bangladesh.

Allow me to present my position on BIDS. I was the Chairman of the Department of Economics at Jahangirnagar University when one of my most favourite and brilliant students approached me for the position of a lecturer in my department. He had stood first all

for their laudable research outputs.

More importantly, the institute had been headed by eminent economists like Nurul Islam, Rehman Sobhan, Swadesh Bose, Mahabub Hossain, Abu Abdullah, whose name and fame crossed the frontiers of Bangladesh.

Allow me to present my position on BIDS. I was the Chairman of the Department of Economics at Jahangirnagar University when one of my most favourite and brilliant students approached me for the position of a lecturer in my department. He had stood first all

for their laudable research outputs.

The demand so created led to the growth of private consultancy firms to supply the "fast research" in a very cost-effective fashion -- the quality question notwithstanding. That is, perhaps, the beginning of this premier organisation's losing importance in the policy making process and taking a back seat.

Another reason should also be cited: The protectionist and anti-reform stances of some of the researchers there also gave the impression to the public that the institute was a breeding ground of "mercantilist" economics.

To add insult to the injury, some of the famous economists also joined the consultancy market and left BIDS for establishing shops for "fast research." Most of the funding of their organisations comes from donors (although they denounce the donors).

Nevertheless, a group of eminent economists led by Quazi Shabuddin (now DG) is working

there and contributing to original research. Meantime, BIDS also got involved in consultancy services as a source of its economic survival, and sause for its researchers.

Needless to mention, the shift has heavily cost BIDS in terms of original research outputs.

Bangladesh needs to keep BIDS as a front runner in the realm of social science research in the country. In other countries also, such organisations are "protected" by governments to derive inputs for policy-making purposes.

BIDS should also survive as a centre of excellence in research by providing its scholars due opportunity to stay there. The organisation has to grow as an indigenous supplier of basic socio-economic information to the government, and help policy makers with suitable alternatives available in a regime of scarce resources.</p