

EPZs need full support

Increase the number to accommodate more investors

IT is welcome news that investment in the existing Export Processing Zones (EPZs) in the country has increased 135 per cent in the first six months of the 2007-2008 fiscal, compared to the performance in the previous fiscal. We are further delighted to learn that the volume of export of processed goods has also increased by 6 per cent in the same period. EPZ chairman Brigadier General Ashraf Abdullah Yusuf revealed the statistics in a press conference on Thursday when he also explained the future plan of his organisation. While we would want the export volume to go up at a faster pace, we consider the present accomplishment worthy of a mention.

There is no denying that EPZs with their investment terms, infrastructure facilities, availability of skilled labour force and orderliness could meet the criteria of many local and foreign investors. As a result, today as many as 264 export-oriented industries are running in full swing, thereby contributing immensely to the growth of our economy. We must also appreciate the fact that these industries have provided employment opportunity to thousands of our skilled manpower. But we are extremely worried at the same time to know that because of unavailability of plots in EPZs, new investors are going away looking for other countries with similar facilities, such as Cambodia, Vietnam and India. EPZ authorities reportedly have applied to the government for setting up new export processing zones but the approval has yet to come from them. We wonder what could be the reason d'être for the delay when we have such good examples of performance right before us? Should not this be the number one agenda on the list of the government that would have a long-lasting impact on our economy?

Rapid industrialisation with an eye for export and export diversification should be given top priority by the government for turning Bangladesh into an industrialised country. And to achieve the target what requires to be done is creating more EPZs with unimpeded gas and electricity supply, better infrastructure facilities and better road connection with the main highways and waterways.

Since the ball is now in the court of the government we would like to urge the officials concerned to expedite the implementation process of the new export processing zones to meet the need of the investors.

Making police more pro-women

A commendable step

THE idea of making the police force more sensitive to the needs of female victims of crime is not only timely it comes at a time when there is an increase in the level of violence against women in Bangladesh. This is a part of the overall police reform package under the auspices of the UNDP, which one hopes will bring in a qualitative change in the mindset of the police while dealing with women's complaints.

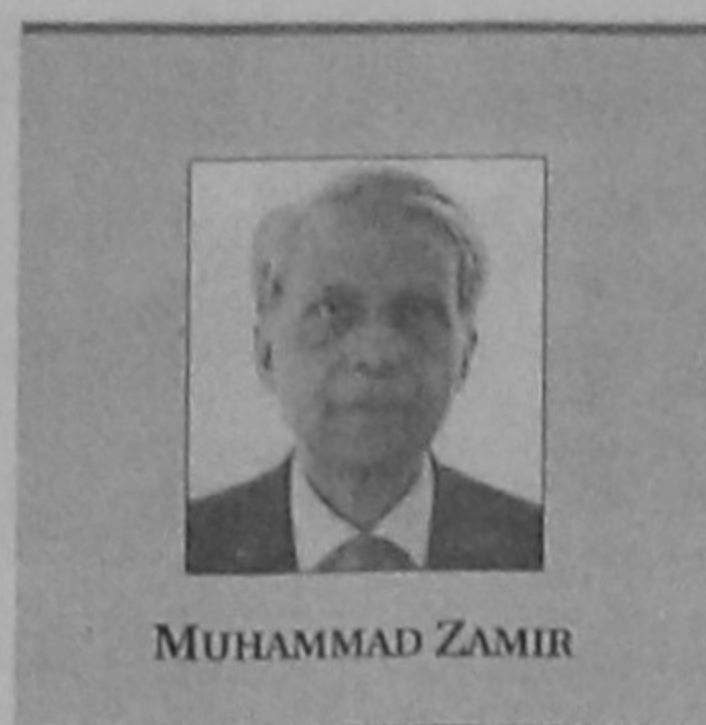
The new arrangement will certainly encourage many female victims of repression, who had so long felt discouraged to go to the police station, take recourse to law and bring the perpetrators to justice. That will, we are sure, in turn help reduce the incidence of violence against women.

One is given to understand that a police reform package is awaiting the green light from the government to come into effect. That will, we would like to hope, once implemented, remove the vestige of the colonial rule that have plagued our police force which was created as an instrument of coercion by the colonial rulers. What we will need for the police to become is more people friendly one that people would not hesitate to accost or seek help from, and one whose presence would engender confidence rather than alarm. That has, unfortunately, not been the case so far.

Thus to see new directives being formulated stipulating gender sensitive guidelines for the police stations to follow, along with setting up of separated police units with women officers to deal with the women victims, is a breath of fresh air. It is also indicative of the changing attitude of the police force, it being now considered more a service provider in whom the needy can seek help and protection without reservations, rather than a coercive arm of the state. An admirable aspect of the new arrangement is that not only will it help taking down the complaint of the women victim with speed and with as little of hassle as possible, from the report available, it will also help as a counseling centre for the victims to help them get over the trauma.

However, making the arrangement efficient will necessitate induction of more female officers in the police force, and that should be one of the priorities of the police high ups when the new police measures are introduced.

Uncertainty intensifies in Pakistan



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

BENAZIR BHUTTO's assassination has left Pakistan shocked and unsure about its democratic future. The elections, scheduled for 8 January 2008, seen by both Pakistani and Western analysts as a way of bringing political stability and restoring the democratic process within the country, now appears to be at risk. The Pakistan Election Commission feels that the prevailing insecurity has reduced the possibility of holding a free and fair election. They consider that a free, fair and credible election would be impossible before next month. They have also indicated that a fresh date would be arrived at after consultation with all the political parties. The Election Commission has probably been encouraged in this regard by a comment from the US State Department spokesman Tom Casey who said that Washington wants elections to go ahead as planned if they can be held in a 'safe and secure' way.

The decision of the Election Commission, as anticipated, has received the support of pro-Musharraf Pakistan Muslim League-Q faction. They feel that any delay will favour their fortune and might reduce the current overwhelming sympathy and support for the opposing political parties. This postponement will however be particularly galling for many who were considering the vote as vital, and a means for sidelining popular opinion away from Islamist militants sympa-

thetic to al-Qaeda. It will also be opposed in the streets by followers of Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and those belonging to the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz Sharif faction).

This anxiety over the internal political dynamics of nuclear Pakistan -- prevailing instability (with over fifty fatal bombings in 2007 largely aimed at military targets and senior government officials) and its deterioration in governance -- over the past few days will only increase concern for its immediate neighbours -- India and Afghanistan -- and also for the wider audience in Europe and the USA.

This has assumed greater seriousness given the fact that over the

within the political stage will only add to the uncertainty and create conditions of further instability within the political matrix of Pakistan.

This has led to serious soul-searching among policy makers in the region. Fundamental questions are now being asked as to whether an election will be enough to lift Pakistan out of its current morass. Some are suggesting that an election alone at this time might not be able to generate the kind of national goodwill that will be needed to pull the country out of the crisis.

Benazir Bhutto's party, founded by her father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was widely seen as a one-person party. The latest decision to

elections and get a government in place. He will however have to be extremely careful that domestic pressure and foreign actors do not create a situation which snowballs into another crisis of legitimacy.

The President's credibility is at risk not only because the largest opposition party has been thrown into disarray so close to the elections (creating a void in the system) but also because of charges that his Administration had failed to prevent the assassination of a former Prime Minister in the high-security garrison town of Rawalpindi. There is also the bizarre controversy with regard to the circumstances that led to the death of Benazir Bhutto and also as to the person or the

ropes. Those wanting democracy to return must also understand the fragility of the situation. Further instability might then end in the re-imposition of a state of emergency and delay in the restoration of the democratic process. One would be tempted to term the situation as Catch-22.

If the scenario deteriorates further, the other option could be Musharraf calling out the military. The new army head Gen Ashfaq Kiyani, Musharraf's handpicked successor, might agree to get associated but would most likely ask Musharraf to step down rather than have Pakistani troops firing on crowds in the streets for the sake of Musharraf. We have seen such a

tribal areas along the western frontier with Afghanistan. Washington and London supported her bid to return from exile, lobbying hard with Musharraf over the past year to get him to allow her to return without her having to face the slew of corruption charges that had been filed against her. Bhutto tried to repay the United States by speaking out strongly on the need to fight militancy in her election campaign speeches.

She pledged that if she returned to power she would implement many of Musharraf's failed promises including the carrying out of reforms in the country's thousands of madrassas. She also went on record that she would allow the United States to take unilateral military action against Pakistani tribal insurgents and al-Qaeda in the frontier areas. She also promised to allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to interview Abdul Qadir Khan, the discredited father of Pakistan's atomic bomb regarding the alleged sharing of sensitive nuclear technology and know-how with such states as Iran, Libya and North Korea. Largely because of those tough, seemingly pro-Western stands, and because she was a woman vying for political power, she became a target of Islamic extremists. In the changed scenario, it would be interesting to see how far her successors would be willing to pursue this trend of thought. That will remain a source of worry for both the USA and also Musharraf.

The United States had hoped the liberal-minded Musharraf and moderate Benazir Bhutto would share power and form a solid bulwark against militancy. The al-Qaeda, the fundamentalist Pashtun militants and their shadowy sympathisers within the Pakistani civil and military administrations however had other ideas. Her death has diminished Musharraf's already low public standing and once again called into question his ability to govern and to deal with Islamic extremism.

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POST BREAKFAST

The United States had hoped the liberal-minded Musharraf and moderate Benazir Bhutto would share power and form a solid bulwark against militancy. The al-Qaeda, the fundamentalist Pashtun militants and their shadowy sympathisers within the Pakistani civil and military administrations however had other ideas. Her death has diminished Musharraf's already low public standing and once again called into question his ability to govern and to deal with Islamic extremism.

past few years, militancy and drug trafficking have carved out special sanctuaries not only within the tribal belt bordering Afghanistan but also in other areas of Pakistan including the port city of Karachi. This in turn has led to instability and intense confrontations. We have seen the effects of these factors in Islamabad, Swat and Waziristan. There have also been low-intensity, armed nationalist insurgency in Pakistan's largest province, Baluchistan, and sporadic sectarian violence in the country's most populous provinces, Punjab and Sindh. This has resulted in an increasingly divided nation with an array of disparate power centres that include the military, the political parties and militant groups.

The assassination of Benazir and the subsequent disagreements appoint Bilawal, her young son, as the Chairman (in waiting) and controversial Asif Ali Zardari, her widowed husband, as Co-Chairman of the party has only confirmed this supposition. This will also raise further questions about democracy within the PPP itself. It is now being felt that this factor might eventually affect cohesiveness and split the party into factions.

The sensitivity of the security situation has worsened over the last few days in Pakistan with an increase in the number of imponderables. Without Ms Bhutto and her considerable grassroots political support, President Musharraf is now being forced to enlist the support of more numerous but less influential individuals to keep things in order. This might eventually enable him to go ahead with

group responsible for the act.

This has only created more confusion. Some have proposed the need for an international judicial commission of inquiry (as was constituted after the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri).

This has been suggested because many do not have faith in the tainted judicial process in Pakistan, which is considered partisan. The Pakistani authorities, for the sake of stability and transparency, should swallow their pride and heed international opinion. It will calm troubled waters in the short term.

One hopes that calm will be restored soon in Pakistan. The murder of Benazir has already affected business confidence and the flow of foreign direct investment. That has pushed the government of Musharraf against the

similar course of action taking place in 1999 in the case of President Ayub Khan and General Yahya Khan. Bhutto's assassination could, in such a situation, conceivably lead to Musharraf's political demise if the popular mood in the coming weeks turns sharply against the President and his regime.

In any case, there is bound to be renewed debate about whether President Musharraf is fit to rule. Whatever happens, President Musharraf faces awkward choices in the weeks ahead.

The West led by the United States and Britain, saw Benazir as someone who could work with the unpopular Musharraf to increase political stability and rally opposition to Pakistan's radical Islamists -- especially the al-Qaeda supporters who have carved out a safe haven in the country's lawless

Addressing corruption at the grassroots

DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH

"RISE against corruption", as anti-graft slogan will continue as a campaign throughout this year round the world. The government is pledged bound to stage a drive against corruption as a signatory to the UN Convention against Corruption.

Corruption retards progress

Corruption contributes in creating inequality in the society. Human rights cannot be established in a society dominated by corruption. Corruption acts against investment, public service delivery, accountability and poverty reduction. In fact, resources accumulated from domestic and external sources cannot be properly utilised in national development where misappropriation and absence of accountability appear as omnivorous elements.

Local authority as appropriate catalyst

All tycoons or political leaders living in the capital and metropolitan cities have their known identity in a village or in a township where they are closely known with their roots and backgrounds. In case, any body is found to be suddenly rich or behaving in an upstart manner, it is the local authority specially Chairman and Member of the Union Parishad who can detect the reasons and sources of accumulation of unaccounted wealth. They can easily identify the presence of any terrorist, or criminal or drug trafficker living in their locality and can take appropriate action. Union Parishad representatives

are, therefore, appropriate catalysts to eliminate any type of terrorism prevailing in the society. The Chairmen and Members of Union Parishad at present, feel the law and order as the subject of the central government and therefore, they do not take initiative to detect or report any type of corruption to the appropriate authority.

Thus, the question of empowerment of local authority appears to be urgent and vital to combat corruption and ensure good governance at the grassroots level. The committee constituted for the

During British regime, there were experiments of local government system including the permanent settlement or Zamindari system by Lord Cornwallis. The Chowkidari Act of 1870 added a new dimension to the local government system and Local Self-government Act was enacted in 1885 through which the system got the legal status to conduct business as government.

The Union Parishad was established in 1919 and for the first time British government gave attention to the development of rural areas besides revenue collection. During

during Basic Democracy period of Ayub Khan, there were deliberate attempts to make it more corrupt and more obliging to the central government.

Areas of reformation

The present reformation proposal, I think, should contain few issues that might help Bangladesh to emerge as a corruption free nation at the grassroots level. Charity begins at home. Equally elimination of institutional corruption must start from the Union level. A few steps need to be taken urgently

The Chairman of the ACC has started an advocacy campaign to generate awareness against corruption at all levels. We wish success of this behaviour change communication programme with the support of public in general. Since the election to the municipalities and Union Parishads might be held during March 2008, the need for reformation activities appears to be urgent in order to combat corruption at the grassroots.

reformation in the local government system has already submitted its report to the government. We are expecting the salient features of recommendations to be made public eliciting opinion of stakeholders, political leaders, civil society organisations etc.

Historical Negligence

In Bangladesh, the role of local government to ensure administration and social justice is historical. During the thirteenth century, village leaders used to recover taxes through the panchayat system for the greater uplift of the society by encouraging education and discipline. Mughal emperors established cities and appointed Kotwals as chief executive after dividing the cities into mahallas.

Pakistan times, introduction of four tiers local government system like basic democracy at the union, thana, district and division level was introduced. A major breakthrough to decentralise the local government took place with the introduction of Thana Parishad and Thana Administrative Reorganisation Ordinance on 23rd December 1982. At this stage, the opportunity for upazila based development and training was created. This was annulled in 1991.

This brief history is being repeated to review the major motives of reformations that took place at different stages of history. In fact, there was no attempt at any stage to develop Local Government as honest and corruption free institution. On the other hand,

in the process to make the local governments free from corruption, are as follows:

Certification: Union Parishad Chairmen, as at present, usually certify the character and the nationality of a person. This is generally done without any in-depth inquiry and examining the antecedent of the incumbent. Union Parishad secretary very casually maintains a register for this purpose. Any body approaching to the UP Chairman can obtain such a certificate, of course, sometimes making payment to the local raising fund of the union parishad, thus virtually encouraging corruption and deception at the grassroots. There should be clear direction and standard format to certify a person and this should be done

with due diligence.

1. Birth and death Registration: The vital registration was always the primary responsibility of union parishad. This was a major work of union board during the British regime and early period of Pakistan. Unfortunately, the Chowkidars and Dafadars do not inform the birth and death cases to the union office and the office also does not maintain the register meticulously. Whenever a person needs a birth certificate, he can approach the Union office and can obtain a birth certificate indicating

could not establish their honesty and integrity in the disbursement of the allocation received from the central government.

The Local Government Division had to supersede many UPs on different occasions on charges of corruption. Many ward members, and project persons were prosecuted for misappropriation of wheat under the food for works programme. The government thereafter started to allocate cash in lieu of wheat and rice to establish accountability in the system. In the process, many PIOs and Thana level officials were involved and prosecuted. This tendency towards corruption must be controlled through procedural and strong regulatory measures.

Village court: One of the major objectives of the local government was to dispense justice at the local level with the introduction of village court. This vision could not work well due to favoritism, political influence and personal vendetta, which could be termed as corruption. No society can develop if the judicial system and rule of law fail to get its footings at the grassroots.

Way forward

The Chairman of the ACC has started an advocacy campaign to generate awareness against corruption at all levels. We wish success of this behaviour change communication programme with the support of public in general. Since the election to the municipalities and Union Parishads might be held during March 2008, the need for reformation activities appears to be urgent in order to combat corruption at the grassroots.

Dhiraj Kumar Nath is a former Secretary.

Land disputes eating into vitals of economy

MD ABDUL KADER

LAND dispute is an old conflict of Bangladesh society linked to the socio-economic-political system. Every year considerable number of people are directly or indirectly affected by land dispute. Specially the landless and poor fisherman communities living in different char and khaslands of the country are falling victim to this dispute and losing both financially and socially. At places eviction of the socially weak landless people has also occurred. Land dispute even led to killing of opponent, grievously hurting, looting of home-stead and arson. Increase in land disputes has a very negative impact on society and economy.

A recent research conducted by Samata, an NGO working with land rights, shows occurrence of more than 750 incidents of land dispute during the past year, which include incidents of murder, too 47 persons reported killed in land disputes during 2006 and a few thousand were injured. The research was conducted on the basis of published reports in six dailies including the Prothom Alo, Ittefaq and Janakantha. It is no

exaggeration that the number of land disputes actually occurred are much more than that reported in the media.

The research revealed that among the so many social, political, economic reasons of land dispute the major one is illegal possession of khas land. The victims are mainly the landless poor. And most of the cases are occurring in khas and charlands. The state talks of unhindered right of the landless to the khaslands, but due to continuous indifference of government officials, non-cooperation of corrupt land officers and muscle flexing of illegal occupants under political grab, land disputes centring the khas lands are on the rise.

According to media reports, enormous amount of government and private lands has been illegally occupied also last year. Among that amount of lands belonging to Roads & Highways, Railways, Water Development Board, City Corporations are more than others -- about 51 per cent -- of which only a meagre portion could be recovered by the respective authorities (Ittefaq, 4 April 2006).

The poor are the most losers.

They have to fight more to stick to their land ownership. They already have lesser access to land, and whatever they have gained, they cannot hold on firmly just because they are poor. The illegal land grabbers have both money and muscle and their main weapon is false litigation against the landless poor, who in course of time would just get tired of continuing the case spending so much money and thus forsake their right to land.

On the other hand, the land grabbers have little discrimination, they just don't miss any opportunity of grabbing any land any time. Such illegal occupation leads to dispute which lingers with the conflicting parties as long as they can sustain. And in the process we find lands of Adibasis and minority communities sliding into illegal occupation. This occupation is rather expedited through the loopholes of Vested Property Act and there being no separate land commission for the Adibasis. Some land grabbers are tactfully occupying temple and cremation ground land, Debottar land, Adibasi land of hills or plains.

Now corruption added to the whole affair of land has created a

new dimension which, besides inciting land dispute in many cases is helping it to linger on. Three Directorates of two Ministries (Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs and Ministry of Land) look over the whole land affair. But lack of coordination among them has led to unabated spread of corruption. Unbounded corruption prevails in matters of survey, mutation, record, certificate etc. at different land offices. This extension of corruption in land survey has in fact expedited increase in land dispute. It is off and on alleged by many that surveyors and record keepers appointed on temporary basis do not record land properly without bribe and when bribed just even record some other's land in the giver's name! As a result the anomaly thus created with ownership of land rolls into dispute to litigation. The surveyors also create anomaly in deciding borders of lands, which again expedites conflicts. During 2006, 37.2 percent of the land disputes occurred from complexity of ownership and problem of deciding border (Jugantar, 15 March 2006).

Various class of people are

trying in various ways to gain land ownership or title. The influential happen to be considerably successful exploiting their influence while the vast multitude of the landless are just getting deprived. In matters of access to land, the poor have little opportunity. But right to land of the landless is legally recognised. Yet they don't have any mentionable access there because of the influential and land grabbers. Khas land, be it in a char area or anywhere else, it is very hard for the landless or the poor to take possession of that.

Land dispute is harming the people both socially and economically. The society must see an end to it. It's a necessity to end these conflicts and help the landless and the poor realise their legally and constitutionally recognised right to khas resources. With a view to ending these disputes we may embark on providing the government research-reached information for adopting pro-poor policies, publicity programme for awareness about the negative side of land dispute, as well as taking some practical steps, etc. Through these we can also help the poor and the landless establish their right.

But only this much will not do. To establish their right and save them from potential loss government, NGOs, research organisations, civil society, development organisation and activists all together should put their united effort. Besides, implementation of political commitment, easy and transparent bureaucratic process and accountability in land administration and management should also be ensured. Cohesion of the bygone days must be back in society.

The following steps may be taken to face and end the existing conflict involving land:

- Coordination between the two ministries (ministry of law, justice & parliamentary affairs and ministry of land) responsible for reducing system complexity and human harassment in matters of land, and putting the matter of land administration under a central authority.
- Regular Diara survey. This will ensure actual amount of river area land and its ownership.
- Bribe and corruption free transparent and correct survey, so that people can come out of the vicious circle of bribery and forged deed to a proper system.

- Local people's participatory survey system with field court during survey period so that the land problems, if any raised, can be resolved then and there.
- Appointing land recorders and surveyors on permanent basis, instead of contract basis, to ensure accountability.
- Modernisation of land record and survey system with imparting necessary training to the officers.
- Strict steps to contain corruption of officers and staff of different level including union land office.
- Distributing Khas land among the poor landless people as per government rules and ensuring their ownership threat.

Constituting district court to settle land dispute cases at district level is a demand of time now. This will reduce the red tapism as well as the conflicts arising out of lingering rivalry. It is very much necessary to make the CHT land commission effective to check forced occupation of Adibasi land and constitute separate land commission to protect the right of plain land Adibasis. It is also necessary to take strict steps for trial and punishment of all offences and crimes committed centering

land dispute. The land-grabbers should be punished and list of Khas resources -- how much and where -- should be published and that taken control of by the government evicting the illegal possessors, and distributed district wise among those really deserving. It is high time the Alluvium Diluvium Act is amended and illegal occupants of water bodies removed towards reducing the occurrence of land dispute.

Social cohesion and unity can play an important part in resolving the problem of land dispute significantly. So, all in the society should act together to strengthen social unity.

Last but not the least, by the blessing of IT and communication system, we already see so much change for better in society. Yet we couldn't reduce the occurrence of land dispute which is harming most of the helpless people. This scourge of sort is depriving them of the very sustenance for life. This problem must be done away with if the society ever thinks of the legal, constitutional right of the landless poor.

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