

Case against DU teachers and students

High time they should be freed

THE detained Dhaka University teachers and students are undergoing a legal process despite the two-week deadline the government had set for their release which expired on December 23. Nearly two weeks have elapsed since then. Their already long period of detention is that much more extended, for how long, nobody can say with any degree of certainty.

One would have expected though, the conciliatory approach adopted between the then education adviser and DU teachers' representatives to complete the legal processes in a fortnight's time to release the detainees would be adhered to. But that was not to be, keeping the university and the guardians at large in a state of tension and animated suspense. One latched on the hope that the time space was required to withdraw the cases which if the government would could always do.

We have it on the authority of the Vice-chancellor that the cases against the teachers and students will not be withdrawn but rather they will be freed through legal procedures. What the legal steps would be one hasn't got the faintest of idea about. If what happened with the release of the RU teachers with the government claiming that their relatives asked for pardon while the latter saying they only demanded their release is, of course, not a precedent worthy of emulation. For, it created unnecessary hard feeling and controversy among the academics. It has to be avoided this time around in the interest of amicable settlement that generates goodwill on both sides.

In these columns on December 9 we had stated... 'since teachers are a highly respected section of society and have been for ages, it will be injudicious on the part of anyone to expect them as well as all the students detained to give an undertaking before they can be freed'. We reiterate our position here. More so, because at this critical juncture, it is of utmost importance that we maintain social harmony and congenial atmosphere be created before the elections.

Utilisation of natural resources

Coordinated policy upholding national interests a must

Aroundtable on our endangered power sector and what needs to be done about it in the national interest emphasises once again an issue of vital public concern. In the past many years, the inefficiency as well as corruption that has sapped the strength of the sector has left the country reeling from its effects, to a point where the nation is still paying a price. One cannot but agree with the participants, many of whom echoed the views of large sections of the public when they referred to improper utilisation of natural resources and unbridled corruption in the power sector as realities we must now contend with. With power shortage now well over 2000 megawatts, it is not unnatural that industrial production in the country will be directly affected.

The time has now arrived for the development and implementation of a well-coordinated and comprehensive national policy on natural resources and their utilisation. The refrain that Bangladesh is home to such resources as coal and gas and so can afford not to worry is itself a cause for worry given that such resources are of a finite nature. And if policy making regarding these and other resources is delayed further (as it has been delayed in these past many years), the consequences can only be imagined. Where fruitful utilisation of energy sources is the question, the moment is here and now for the government to develop a negotiating position with foreign companies that will strictly uphold the national interest in the field of exploration, domestic consumption and export. Part of the national interest, one might add, lies in enhancing our domestic exploration capacity as a way of cutting down on dependence on outside expertise.

We share the view of the roundtable participants that a proper policy on natural resources utilisation will uphold the principle that the country is actually for its people. The corruption that has taken a toll already owing to the nefarious roles played in the power sector by bureaucrats, lawmakers and political leaders at the highest levels of government must now be rolled back, and drastically too. But that can be done through the adoption of a proper, foolproof policy vis-à-vis development of natural resources. At the same time, Bangladesh should seriously initiate policies aimed at a development and exploration of alternative sources of energy (basically in the region of solar, bio-gas and wind resources) in order to tackle the compulsions of the future.

The winter of discontent



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

THE assassination of Benazir Bhutto has dealt a serious blow to the re-emergence of democracy in Pakistan and the country's return to stability. Echoing global sentiment, Brussels based International Crisis Group in a statement said: "Pakistan's military backed interim government is not in a position to carry out a fair investigation into the assassination. The United Nations Security Council should meet urgently to establish an international commission of enquiry to determine who ordered and carried out the killings. Given the long standing connections between the Pakistan military and jihadi groups, this would be the only way to carry out an impartial and credible investigation."

Benazir's husband Asif Ali Zardari, in the first press conference after the "election" of Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, the 19 year old son of Benazir, as the next Chairman of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), also demanded an international investigation in line with the one sponsored by UNSC regarding the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. The

GOING DEEPER

No one would blame Benazir for her privileged birth. One would be inclined to share the grief of multiple tragedies that she had suffered in her lifetime. The point, however, remains that Pakistani society, being largely ruled by oligarchs where the individual still has to free himself from tradition, where primordial tribal loyalty predominates decision making process, where religious edicts by village Maulanas have quasi-judicial force, and gender inequality is accepted as normative social order, institution of Western liberal democracy would remain a far cry. Yet, among the current leaders in Pakistan.

Pakistani government, however, had ruled out international cooperation in any such enquiry. But President Musharraf's assurance to Gordon Brown that he would consider taking foreign assistance in investigating the assassination is at variance with the comments made by the caretaker Prime Minister Mian Soomro that Pakistani experts were competent enough for the job.

Divergence of opinion between the two top people in Pakistan compounds the confusion already surrounding the manner of death of Benazir. More so as al-Qaeda's Pakistani head, blamed by Pakistani authorities for Benazir's death, has denied the complicity of his organisation in the assassination.

But Bruce Riedel, former defense and intelligence official in George H W Bush and Clinton administrations, is inclined to believe that al-Qaeda could have killed Benazir in line with the attempts on President Musharraf's life, made possible by the fact that "al-Qaeda has sympathisers at the highest level

of security and intelligence which provided information on his (Musharraf) movements in the past, which facilitated the efforts to kill him."

It is also widely believed that a section of ISI has retained connections with the Taliban and al-Qaeda as a hedge against possible US abandonment of Pakistan in favour of India should the crunch come.

One wonders whether, given the bloody history of political assassinations in the sub-continent--Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and General Ziaur Rahman in Bangladesh; Mahatma Gandhi, Indira Gandhi and Rajeev Gandhi in India; Solomon Bandernaike and President Premadasa in Sri Lanka; Liaquat Ali Khan, judicial murder of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and now of Benazir Bhutto -- the assassination of Benazir was not inevitable.

Her will, written only two days before her departure for Karachi, giving detailed instructions on the political steps to be carried

out by PPP testifies to her premonition of death. She said so to CNN's Wolf Blitzer in a recent interview.

To South Asian expert Stephen Cohen, whom she and her husband met just before she departed for Pakistan, she said that she needed to restore her contacts with the Pakistani people, and, being a gradualist, she was not averse to working with President Musharraf -- an arrangement that changed after her return to Pakistan with Musharraf's declaration of emergency and defacing of the country's judiciary beyond pale. Musharraf's popularity is now almost non-existent, as is evident from a recent poll by the International Republican Institute that two-thirds of Pakistanis would like Musharraf to step down and give up power.

Despite widespread call by the international community on President Bush to follow a Pakistan policy instead of Musharraf policy and, amidst growing suspicion that billions of dollars given in assistance to

Pakistan, to fight the al-Qaeda have found their way to bolster the Pakistan military along the line of control in Kashmir, the US administration is reluctant to admit that its counter insurgency policy is just not working.

According to Bruce Riedel: "The way that Pakistan is going to be able to fight terrorism is to have a legitimate, democratically elected, secular government that can rally the Pakistani people to engage the al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and other extremist movements. The army has failed to do that. The army dictatorship has failed to do so. We should now press for democratic movement to move forward." It is easier said than done.

Pakistan society is still mired in social stratification based on the long history of feudalism that forms its basis. How else could one explain the "crowning" of Bilawal at the tender age of 19 years, who had to add the name of Bhutto with that of Zardari, his father's name, to become the head of PPP?

The first few chapters of Benazir's autobiography Daughter of the East, e.g. "our lands like those of other landowners in Sindh were measured in square miles, not acres," or "hundreds of thousands throughout India and Pakistan belonged to the Bhutto tribe, one of the largest in Sindh," testify to the feudalistic upbringing she had, which left marks on her character despite her Harvard and Oxford education.

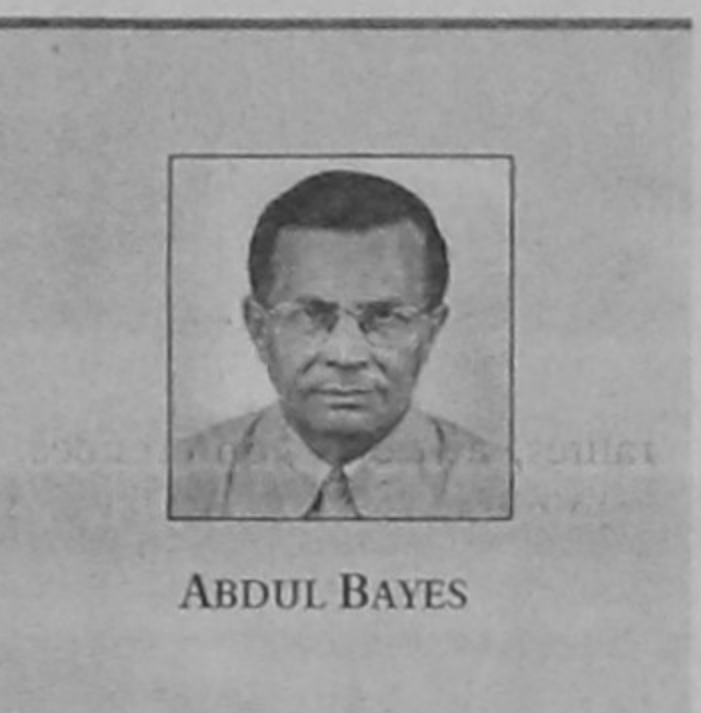
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Her death, says Stephen Cohen, could deal a death blow to the idea of a liberal and moderate Pakistan and "its further decay will affect its neighbours, Europe, and the United States in unpredictable and unpleasant ways... In Pakistan, it is likely that separatism will increase, as will violent extremist Islamism. Benazir's death will cripple the already besieged moderate elements of civil society (Assassination Aftermath-Jan01-Brookings Institution)." Pakistan's neighbours would do well to deal with their own brand of extremism and move all countries of South Asia towards modernity denoting economic prosperity, secularisation and humanisation of their respective societies.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

The 'price' of high rice prices



ABDUL BAYES

THAT soaring rice prices are hitting households below the belt is not a secret in a market economy and a society with media independence. Media independence has both a good and a bad side -- depending on how one looks at it. It is good because it keeps a government awake and updated so that riots and rumours do not cost popularity of the government. That is why it is said that democratic societies with press freedom rarely face famines.

The bad side is that some governments, especially autocratic, feel embarrassed by the "horror" news and consider it to be a conspiracy of the opponents. I feel that the present government will take the reports as wake-up calls in a country where rice prices determine politics. The high

BENEATH THE SURFACE

Another factor should also be noted. Two-thirds of rural households are net buyers of rice in the market, while only one-third are net sellers. Again, 14 percent of rural households supply 80 percent of the surplus in the market, and a remunerative price for them is also a candidate for due attention. Bangladesh's rice policy is thus faced with conflicting policy choices: keeping rice prices low for the majority and high for the minority who supply the bulk to the market.

price of onions and its impact on state election results in India may be recalled. Rice has a price in the market, but its soaring trend with reduced accessibility might force a government to pay heavy price in terms of popularity.

Rice and reality

Rice is not only a staple food for Bangladesh; it is also a strategic commodity. In economic jargon, the demand is inelastic for the poor segment of the population. Hence, they have to spend up to 60-70 percent of their income on rice alone. In a country where rice is a source of calories for survival, the poor people's coarse rice is reportedly selling at Tk.32-33/kg. The price of food-grains seems to have escalated by 30 percent in the last one month and 70 percent in the last one year. Food

prices have affected the overall inflation rate, driving it to double-digit level.

That means, a rickshaw puller earning Tk.100/day, and with a family of six, can buy just three kilograms of rice (the required amount), but nothing would be left for vegetables or for non-food expenses; or else, the poor puller could reduce the consumption of rice by one kilo to meet other expenses. The said household might have to withdraw children from education. Reducing consumption would mean that the next day his earning may not be Tk.100, as calorie deficiency might make him weak and force him to return home after few hours of driving.

However, in some places, rise in nominal wage on the heels of increased demand for labour may

provide some solace to the labour class. The fixed low-income groups are worst hit. Middle-income groups -- the major vote bank -- also suffer, but a wage hike might heal their wounds temporarily.

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Rising prices of rice in Bangladesh is the talk of the

dining tables and tea stalls. As I presume, it is also the talk of our advisers sitting there with the responsibility of feeding people at an affordable price. Surely, the government does have a role to play in stabilising prices, and any statement counter to that it is destabilising for the market and damaging for the government.

Worldwide woes

Let me say that rising food prices are a worldwide reality, with prices of several different staple food stuffs reaching a record level. The rising price of oil (now \$100/barrel) may fuel the flame by raising farming costs and higher shipping costs in the equation. Climate change could also have an adverse impact. An official of FAO says: "Rarely has the world felt such a widespread and commonly shared concern about food price inflation, a fear which is fueling debates about the future direction of agriculture commodity prices in importing and exporting countries."

Role of government

The government has a positive role to play in this crisis. It should wake up to soaring rice prices. But how? Policies must be chalked out with an eye on immediate, medium-term and long-

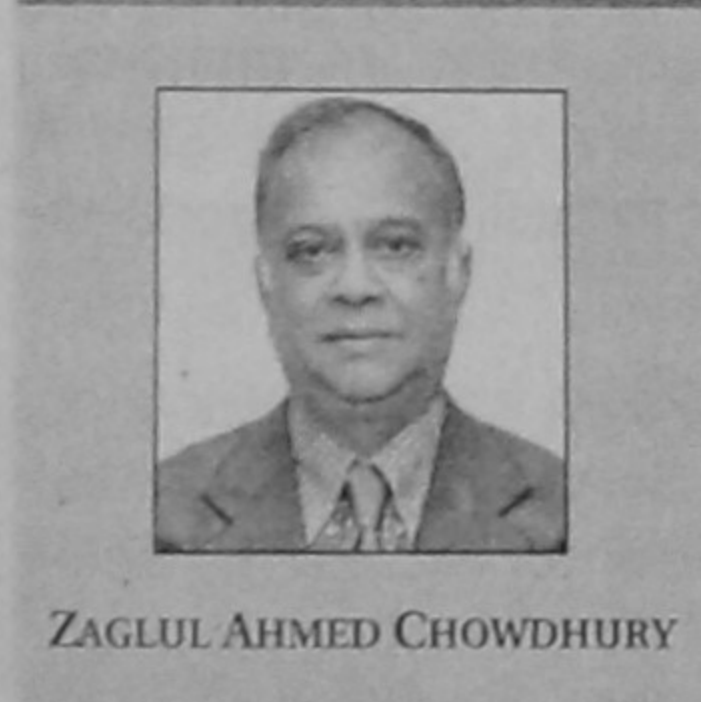
term needs. The immediate steps should be geared to avert food deficit till the boro harvest reaches home. That should lead to the following.

First, import rice even at higher price. Bangladesh has the reserves to do that. The imports should be immediate and well-monitored. Second, immediately open OMS and extend the operation beyond the paurashavas. Third, continue the VGF operations. Fourth, let the market take care of fertiliser distribution, but with "watch-dogs" set by the government to oversee it. Remember, farmers are concerned more with timely availability of inputs rather than with rise in input price (unless it is abnormal). Fifth, request donors to supply food as aid, instead of cash.

On the other hand, the long-term solutions have to do with climate change and cropping patterns, technological breakthrough in, and infrastructure for, non-rice crops, technologies for backward agro-ecological regions, changing dietary diversity etc. But more important is living in the short-run. In the long run we all are dead!

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2007 -- South Asia was in focus in contrasting ways



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

EVENTS in two countries in South Asia, in contrasting fashions, hogged headlines not only in the region but also in the international scene in 2007. Interestingly, one event took place early in the year, which was talked about as a positive issue, while the other at the end of the year caused severe adverse repercussions.

The event in Bangladesh on January 11, 2007 was widely seen as a timely measure to stave off a catastrophic situation stemming from manifold complications. On the other hand, the cruel assassination of former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto on December 27 spoke of a growing turmoil in a neighbouring South Asian nation. Other regional countries were not without devel-

MATTERS AROUND US

It appears that the political environment in the South Asian region has both happily improved and unfortunately nose-dived in recent times. A successful conclusion of the last Saarc summit in New Delhi augured well for the region, with the next summit scheduled in the Maldives in the current year. The summits of Saarc leaders often suffer postponements, but the 14th summit in April, 2007 remained very much on track and was largely seen as business-like and productive.

opments of significance, but these two events were the cynosure of all eyes in South Asia in the past year.

South Asia witnessed both turmoil and remarkable achievements during the 2007, making the region more talked about in world affairs, compared to many other preceding years. Most nations in the area saw political unrest during the period, while some landmark developments brought the region international laurels.

While Bangladesh was free from political mayhem and instability, barring the first few days of the beginning of the year, some positive developments took place in Nepal, where the government and the radical Maoists forged commendable broad unity despite occasional strain in their

ties. India remained by and large without major problems while two small nations -- the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan and the Indian Ocean island state of Maldives -- showed greater readiness to accept democracy as a pattern of governance.

Pakistan, the second largest country in the region remained volatile throughout the year with plenty of developments, mainly centering the general and presidential elections. Sadly, the year ended with the gruesome murder of a charismatic figure of South Asia, who was the first Muslim woman prime minister of the world.

Sri Lanka remained volatile as the civil war showed no respite, it, rather, grew in intensity even though both the government and the Tamil militants

spoke of peace. In fact, the nation is bleeding white, with no sign of a negotiated settlement of the more than two decade long civil war in sight. Afghanistan, the latest member in the Saarc family, was more restless internally. On the whole, South Asia saw some positive developments, but the negatives ones weighed heavily in the region.

It appears that the political environment in the South Asian region has both happily improved and unfortunately nose-dived in recent times. A successful conclusion of the last Saarc summit in New Delhi augured well for the region, with the next summit scheduled in the Maldives in the current year. The summits of Saarc leaders often suffer postponements, but the

14th summit in April, 2007 remained very much on track and was largely seen as business-like and productive.

The summit infused some degree of new dynamism in the regional forum, eliminating much of the inertia and frustration that characterised it before, and all are now eagerly looking forward to the 15th summit. Certainly, this bodes well for the region and the Saarc as a whole, even though the progress of the forum remains somewhat sluggish.

In the western front, ties between two traditionally rival neighbours -- India and Pakistan -- are in the process of normalization, and several meetings between the two countries on a variety of bilateral issues was seen a further development in their often-battered relationship. Needless to say, the Saarc -- particularly the summits -- had fallen victim to Indo-Pakistan hostilities many a time before. Scheduled conferences of the heads of government had to be deferred indefinitely, and were made possible only when New Delhi-Islamabad ties improved.

The current state of New Delhi-Islamabad relations provides encouragement to the overall South Asian political milieu.

There is hardly any denying that their bilateral ties have a bearing on the regional scene, which is largely contingent upon Indo-Pakistan relationship. Their topsy-turvy ties were relatively stable in the preceding year.

Individually, Nepal and Bangladesh bore the brunt of political problems during 2006 causing strain in their political and economic conditions. Things improved for them in 2007, but the expectations of their people have grown high and the governments need to meet these hopes through good governance and policies. Both countries took praiseworthy steps in line with people's expectations to curb corruption, as many high ups, otherwise believed to be beyond touch, were taken to task. Bangladesh and Nepal are now bracing for meaningful elections before the current year is over, and the success of the governments will largely depend on successfully carrying out the agenda.

Nepal capped the year with a momentous decision -- the parliament approving the abolition of monarchy in the country. The government had earlier taken several measures to curtail the king's political and financial

powers and facilities, which were highly disproportionate for the small and poverty-ridden country. Seven political parties and the "Maoists" had jointly waged the anti-king movement, and now both have a duty to turn their country into a truly peaceful nation and the lovely land once again into a paradise. More importantly, from a Hindu kingdom, Nepal is moving to become a secular Republic.

Bangladesh was very much in the news from the last days of 2006, and beginning of 2007, centering the upcoming national elections scheduled for January 22, but the political deadlock kept normal life paralysed as the country stepped into the new year. The diametrically opposite positions of the two main stakeholders in the political arena further compounded the situation, with heightening of public tension and anxiety over the shape of things to come.

Finally, the development in the form of a new caretaker government brought relief. The nation expects a healthy and peaceful phase with national elections by the end of the year-end, and it remains to be seen how the developments unfold in the future.

The popular king in the small

Himalayan country of Bhutan is showing increasing signs of giving up his total grip on power by a long term plan of some kind of democratisation, and this is being well received in the calm and peaceful kingdom. In the tiny Indian Ocean nation of the Maldives, a long serving president is giving in to the demand for multiparty democracy, and this too marks growing signs of the strengthening of representative government in South Asia.

The region -- the most densely populated in the world -- is fighting to improve the living standard of most of its 1.4 billion people who are mired in poverty. Political problems, unbridled corruption and lack of good governance are among the problems that thwart expected progress in South Asia.

The region, evidently, will wait in the new year for many developments in positive directions as a sequel to healthy trends of 2007, while it is also expected that unhealthy and divisive ones, both nationally and regionally, will take a back seat and be discouraged in 2008. One can only hope that those who matter and shape things will not turn a deaf ear.

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