

## Implement downsized ADP by all means

Development deficit mustn't be allowed to grow

WITH only 25 percent of the Annual Development Programme (ADP) implemented in the first seven months of fiscal 2007-08, it has had to be revised downward to make it realisable. The original ADP has been slashed by Tk 4,000 crore to stand at Tk 22,500 crore. The whittling down of allocations, well past the half way point of the year, raises the stake in implementation and, to that extent, all the ministries must redouble their efforts to execute the projects they have hunkered down to. Whilst the allocations coming from local resources will be reduced drastically, somewhat redeeming news is that allocations from foreign resources will increase by 15 percent made possible by donors' increased budgetary support of Tk 5,425 crore owing to cyclone Sidr and floods.

The government is giving thrust to minimising developmental discrimination based on geographical locations. The revised ADP and the new allocations acknowledge ten districts as lagging behind needing a shot in the arm. Tk 15 crore is being allocated to develop livelihoods which is obviously a peanut. The government's lump sum allocation for development of local governments and Chittagong Hill Tracts looks somewhat reasonable at Tk 150 crore.

What we look at with trepidation is that development funds are being diverted from rural development, power, communications and water development sectors on the ground that they could not implement projects assigned to them. And for all we know, these sectors are in dire need for development. It seems to us that more important that a ministry is, less likely it's to complete projects. This is a non-political, technocratic government that should have been best suited in terms of efficient selection of projects from feasibility point of view and therefore only expected to accelerate the process of implementation. Now while hurrying through the process they must stand guard against any compromise on quality.

## All the talk about all those talks



SHAHEEN WAHID

WE have a rich tradition of sitting down with political opponents to "talk" about problems across the table. From the presidential house or the prime minister's office down to the tiny union council office in the village, people have been sitting and talking, talking and sitting, since time immemorial. But our experience shows that in the end, from most of such talk or *baithak*, nothing substantive transpires, as everyone sticks to his gun. It is like the arbitration where one party says: "I shall accept whatever the verdict is, but the mango tree is mine." Hence, in most cases, talks or dialogues turn out to be a classic example of "much ado about nothing."

During the Pakistan days, we heard of many round table talks between Ayub henchmen and political leaders from East Pakistan (Bangladesh). Our leaders kept their hold-alls and *paan dibba* ever ready, in case call for a round table came from

## SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

With such "historic dialogues" strewn all over our political history book, we are now a little skeptical about the efficacy of such *modus operandi* in gaining any mileage on the political track. We keep hearing about the caretaker government or the Election Commission sitting down with the political parties for dialogue. Have the political parties, especially the two major parties, ever sat across a table to take vital decisions for the greater interest of the country? They did not even listen to one another when the parliament sessions were on, which was the designated venue for initiating talks on things of national interest. Sorry, they did sit down, forgetting all the differences and forgetting all the bickering. They sat down and talked and reached consensus when it was about their own interest, such as, raising salary and perks, getting NAM flats, obtaining duty free cars, etc.

Rawalpindi. Most of such talks were about removing disparity and equitable distribution of wealth between West Pakistan and East Pakistan. But once there, our leaders watched in shock how jute, tea and hide money earned by East Pakistan was being used to build Islamabad, and massive edifices in West Pakistan with the best of mosaic slabs and expensive modern fittings. So much for dialogues.

Then there was the marathon talk initiated by the Yahya-Bhutto clan in Dhaka, that continued till March 23, 1971. The talks continued, centering round how to transfer power to the elected representatives and who would be the prime minister of Pakistan. It was obvious from the 1970 election results that Sheikh Mujibur

Rahman would be the prime minister. But they needed meetings, talks, *baithaks*, dialogues and what not, to settle the issue! Every day seemed like a month, as the entire Bengali nation waited with bated breath. Then came the night of March 25, when the outcome of that marathon talk was announced in the language of machine guns and mortars. So much for sitting down across the table with the Pakistani military junta!

Ah! Now we intend to backtrack to the recent past and reminisce about the legendary "dialogue" between Awami League's Abdul Jalil and BNP's Abdul Mannan. When the nation remained in a cliff-hanging position, when people waited outside the Parliament building, when the

entire media of the country remained watchful outside, the two leaders came, smiled, waved and disappeared inside for hours. When they came out, every day, they said there was progress in their dialogue. What kind of progress? You will know about it soon, was the ready answer.

In one instance, Abdul Jalil became irritated at the questions of the media people, and said unless there was any progress in the talk why should he be wasting his time here. Perfect. It was the answer of a seasoned politician. But was it? It didn't take the nation to realise that Abdul Mannan was taking Abdul Jalil for a ride, but strangely enough the "clever" Jalil had no inkling of it. He had been coming and going when there was no progress at all! They hadn't

progressed an inch, beyond drinking cups of tea and munching on some biscuits, all provided by the exchequer.

On the last day, the blank face of Abdul Jalil said it all. He had no idea that Abdul Mannan had no power to commit anything during those tumultuous days. He had no authority to allow an inch to the opponent because he knew if he did so then his head would roll outside on the pavement.

If you recall, it was BNP that benefited from the so-called "dialogue," because the drama had brought to an end the agitation of Awami supporters on the roads, who had been demanding that the 4-party alliance relinquish power and hand it over to a caretaker government. But, because of the dialogue drama, BNP could reach the wee hours of its 5-year rule. While Awami supporters expected Abdul Jalil to produce the "trump" card this time around, he came out of the Parliament building for the last time ashen faced, empty handed.

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When one talks about a dialogue, one has to be sincere about starting it with no strings attached, whether it is on the part of the government or the political parties or among the political parties. The mind-set has to be one of give and take and not take only, like that thing about the mango tree.

When it comes to greater national interest, politicians should not try their quaint antics, which they do all the year round. In a dialogue they have to be clever but not sly; they have to be focused but not ignorant; they have to be clear but not evasive. The bottom line is: National interest must come before personal or party interest. If politicians cannot develop such a mindset, they will never be able to do any good for the nation. Talk or *baithak* will produce nothing.

Shaheen Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

## Heaps of potatoes risk going waste

Govt must help farmers store it safely

POTATO growers in Munshiganj, the country's prime potato production zone, are reported to be facing huge financial losses, despite a bumper harvest this year. The prices of potatoes have fallen by around 25 percent as the farmers are forced to sell their products at lower prices in the absence of cold storage facilities. The cold storages have allegedly been hired well in advance by the middlemen, leaving no space for the farmers.

This is another example of the farmers being deprived of the real value of their products, thanks to the tactics adopted by middlemen. They can and do manipulate the market by creating a situation where the poor farmers are left with one losing option -- selling potato at a price that does not even cover production costs. Their predicament was aggravated in the first place by increased prices of agricultural inputs.

The farmers cannot of course come out of the vicious cycle on their own. Even if they were in a position to avail themselves of the existing storage facilities, they could preserve only around 50 per cent of their produce. So, the storage facilities are clearly very inadequate. And it is evident that proper planning and creation of the required facilities for storing farm products are areas where the agriculture department has made little headway.

Potatoes come very close to being seen as an alternate staple, particularly when production of rice falls far short of our requirement. The prices of potatoes remain within reach of most consumers but have not fallen much by virtue of a bumper harvest. However, the situation may soon change for the worse if the farmers are frustrated by lack of cold storage facilities leading to damage of the produce. They may even veer away from this much of potato cultivation.

So, creation of storage facilities resistant to the kind of manipulation witnessed in Munshiganj must be high on the agriculture department's agenda. In fact, such facilities are required for many other agricultural products. Without question, wastage and lack of storage facilities of farm products will only put further strain on the economy.

We urge the government to build some big cold storage facilities in the areas concerned. Private sector may be given bank loans to add to their capacity. In addition, the local authorities do need to flush the middlemen who are blocking cold storage spaces.

## Fateful moment for the Congress



PRAFUL BIDWAI  
writes from New Delhi

THERE'S probably only one thing on which there exists across-the-board agreement about the Indian National Congress: Ms Sonia Gandhi has grown in her job as party president. If her takeover 10 years ago occurred amidst raucous sloganeering against incumbent Sitaram Kesri, her continuation today is seen as natural, well-deserved and dignified by many of her detractors, as well as supporters.

The churlish and xenophobic demand that she should hold no public position in India because of her "foreign origins" hasn't died down. But it has become muted -- and irrelevant for most Indians. Her decision to live and work in India as a citizen is widely respected.

Soon after Ms Gandhi took over, the Congress handsomely won the Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Delhi assembly elections, held immediately after the Pokharan-II blasts, which were supposed to help the Bharatiya Janata Party.

Yet, the rejuvenated Congress

## THE PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

Spring 2004 was Ms Gandhi's finest moment. She single-handedly built the would-be United Progressive Alliance by reaching out to every secular party, including the DMK -- accused of colluding with the LTTE. She succeeded in breaking the back of "anti-Congressism."

spent 5 years deluding itself that the people would reject coalitions and return to "one-party dominance."

It was only in 2003, after the Congress lost the 2002 Gujarat assembly on top of the Lok Sabha elections, that it decided to form broad-based coalitions against the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance.

It also attempted a break with its "soft-Hindutva," conservative, free-market orientation under Narasimha Rao. It coined the Left-of-Centre slogan, "Congress ka haath, garib ke saath" -- although soon, *aam admi* replaced *garib*. It promised food security and a National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.

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Ms Gandhi further enhanced her moral-political stature when, in May 2004, she renounced the prime ministership. She has, since, remained the pre-eminent

figure in Indian politics.

But she had to pay a price for keeping away from day-to-day governance by conceding autonomy to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's team, including arch-conservatives Montek Singh Ahluwalia and P. Chidambaram.

Early on, the UPA's neo-liberal proclivity was contained to some extent by the National Common Minimum Program negotiated with the Left.

Ms Gandhi also tried to influence policy through the National Advisory Council, comprised of progressive intellectuals and administrators. This became near-defunct after she resigned on the "office-of-profit" issue. Her re-election to Parliament hasn't led to its revival.

Ms Gandhi succeeded in ending *Hindutva*'s 6 years-long spell, in creating hope for a just society, and putting the Congress back into power after years. But she's reluctant to shape its economic and foreign policies, or to break its dynasty-based culture.

The UPA/Congress has, since, drifted in a neo-liberal direction. Its policies have worsened the condition of a majority of the

population. Radical course correction is overdue. But the UPA seems unwilling to do this -- despite the economic adversities confronting the people.

With rising oil and food prices, inflation could soon cross 6 percent. The poor are bitterly complaining of high prices of grains and vegetables. The decline of the dollar and the stock-market meltdown are slowing investment and growth.

All this calls for refutation through public investment in the infrastructure. But the UPA, following monetarist dogma, has fought shy of this.

The UPA's budget did take some pro-people measures, like writing off Rs 60,000 crores in farmers' loans, and modestly increasing spending on an expanded NREGA.

The loan-waiver must be welcomed as a moral acknowledgment of the grave agrarian crisis, which has driven 150,000 farmers to suicide over a decade.

However, the waiver won't become another *garibi hatao* -- the "one big thing" that transforms the Congress's relationship to the masses. Its limitations are becoming obvious.

The waiver excludes the majority (58 percent) of farmers, who lack access to organised credit. The 2-hectare ceiling is far too low for distressed rain-fed regions like Vidarbha, where the average holding exceeds 3 ha. The 25 percent write-off for higher-than-ceiling holdings shouldn't be made conditional upon the pre-payment of the rest of the loan.

Unless the UPA rectifies these flaws, it may end up creating more agrarian discontent. In Vidarbha, an average of 7 farmers have committed suicide every day since the budget.

Similarly, unless more money, and political and administrative commitment, is put into the NREGA, it won't meet the target of creating 100 person-days of work for each rural poor household.

If the UPA really wants to revive agriculture and combat mass poverty, it must make big investments in the infrastructure, irrigation, equitable water-sharing and prevention of land erosion. It must make growth inclusive and more labour-intensive.

Above all, the UPA must provide public services as a matter of right, including healthcare, drinking water, education, labour welfare and social security.

The UPA must identify itself with marginalised social strata, including Dalits and OBCs, especially the most backward classes. It must take affirmative action for Muslims in keeping with the

Sachar report.

It isn't enough that Mr Rahul Gandhi spends a night in a Dalit's house, as he recently did. The Congress must establish a program-based pro-Dalit image.

The UPA has built skewed relationships with the United States and Israel, while ignoring a broad-horizon agenda with an emphasis on justice and peace in international relations.

India has become US-obsessed. It often fails to pull its weight -- e.g. on Burma and Tibet -- or take stands on ending Palestine's occupation, stopping Nato's expansion, and the militarisation of space.

Ms Gandhi has been inarticulate on these matters because she's "advised" to keep silent in view of her "origins." This must change if she wants the Congress/UPA to alter policy course and cultivate a plebeian social base different from its upper-caste middle class core following, supplemented by sundry layers.

Organisationally, Ms Gandhi must stop promoting her son, and revive long-moribund democratic structures, such as the Congress Parliamentary Board, district- and state-level committees, and policy forums, which generate popular feedback on policies.

Ms Gandhi shouldn't dilly-dally on implementing this wide-ranging agenda.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

## Politics of fresh perspectives



ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

I was extremely amused when I saw Channel-i's recent interviews of high officials, political luminaries, and prominent businessmen, asking them what they dreamt about the future of Bangladesh.

Regulatory Commission Chairman Akbar Ali Khan, IGP Nur Muhammad and others shared their honest wish lists -- but all appeared to be divorced from reality and past experiences.

However, I gave the PSC chairman, my former Dhaka University classmate, Saadat Hussain, a perfect score of 10 for his response. He said: "I stopped dreaming a long time ago. I'm a

## NO NONSENSE

The idea of a national government has been floating for a while now, and the major political parties are averse to it for obvious reasons -- power and status. But what other options do they have -- street violence, hartals and lockouts? Only their cronies -- not the toiling masses -- would support the acrimonious politics of the pre-1/11 era.

realist now -- trying to live with the realities as they emerge."

What really peeved me though, were the dreams depicted by Mannan Bhuiyan (BNP), Ameer Hossain Amu (AL), and other politicians. It would have been interesting if Channel-i could record former Prime Ministers Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia's dreams for Bangladesh.

People were bluffed decade after decade with the illusion of "Sonar Bangla" -- one that seemed to be only for a few political families and their cronies in public service and business. These politicians have had all the opportunities to realise some of the same dreams they recently conjured up again in their Channel-i interviews.

During my short trip (February

22-March 6) to Bangladesh, I saw faces grim with desperation because of the price hikes. Although this is a global phenomenon, the stressed masses are not convinced about it. Politicians are also sowing confusion among the distressed consumers by censoring the CTG and even threatening to stage protest rallies, as if the government isn't unleashing its magic wand to bring down prices.

While in Bangladesh, I was frantically looking for an opportunity to chat with some honest politicians in local and national politics, notwithstanding the comments of friends that finding "honest politicians" would be a near-impossible hunt. But finding honest politicians wasn't as difficult as one would have

thought, if one was looking for politicians who were never elected to the Parliament or held high political office.

I met two politicians -- Nurul Islam, president of Gonotrantra Party (who never held any political office) and Zafar Imam (minister in Ziaur Rahman's and HM Ershad's government). I met them separately, without sharing what I learnt from the other.

Among the myriad issues, the ones that took center stage in our discourses were corruption, exit strategy of the caretaker government, formation of a national government, and national political reconciliation convention.

To both politicians, the corruption and sleaze that were unearthed by the task force came as a shock. They also consider the

ongoing crusade against corruption as inconceivable, given the performance of the previous anti-corruption bureau, and opined that the mission must continue unhindered regardless of which political party comes to power. However, they want the process to be absolutely fair and transparent for unstinted public confidence and support.

I asked them if they would join the Moulovi Bazar and Chittagong type anti-corruption procession led by ACC Chairman Hasan Mashud Chowdhury, and if such a public awareness campaign would be supported by other politicians. They thought that the initiative, although symbolic, would be productive if organised with carefully selected politicians from all parties. This would generate public confidence that politicians, when they come to power, would dare not weaken the ACC's movement against corruption.

I met a few friends who are concerned about the exit strategy of the CTG, national election, and power transfer. They believe that

a national government consisting of all major parties should be constituted to complete the reform process undertaken by the CTG, which would pave the way for a smooth transition to an elected government.

Both Zafar Imam and Nurul Islam expressed the popular view that a national government was unconstitutional, and even if it was accepted by all politicians it could not be an alternative to a democratic government. They, however, recognise that such a government with well defined agendas may have an appeal for a limited time.

The idea of a national government has been floating for a while now, and the major political parties are averse to it for obvious reasons -- power and status. But what other options do they have -- street violence, hartals and lockouts? Only their cronies -- not the toiling masses -- would support the acrimonious politics of the pre-1/11 era.

Politicians have been pressing for a dialogue with the CTG for some time now. Their demand for

release of the former premiers from captivity, lifting of the state of emergency and early election is being voiced with monotonous regularity. They meet foreign visitors and diplomats, who also voice the demand of the politicians in press briefings and seminars.

Both Nurul Islam and Zafar Imam responded positively when I apprised them of the indignity of foreign diplomats meddling in the internal affairs of a sovereign nation. I had thought that this kind of diplomacy had ended with the recalling of US ambassador Patricia Butenis last year. Apparently, it has raised its annoying head again.

I pleaded with them to convince their leaders to disassociate themselves from such efforts by foreign diplomats to engage in our domestic politics. Only senators, congressmen and parliamentarians from foreign countries may make courtesy calls on our politicians, if at all -- but not career diplomats.

What the country has been crying for is agreement among

the political parties about consensus-based institutional reforms for good governance, and an oath of adherence to those reforms.

In a 2004 article entitled, "Political reconciliation through a struggle for recognition?" in Social and Legal Studies, Andrew Schaap of the University of Melbourne, Australia wrote:

"In societies divided by a history of political violence, political reconciliation depends on transforming a relation of enmity into one of civic friendship. In such a context, the discourse of recognition provides a ready frame in terms of which reconciliation might be conceived."

Before meeting the CTG for a dialogue, political parties should organise a national political reconciliation convention to thrash out all intra-party and inter party frictions that culminated in the 1/11 state of emergency, and show the people that "we are ready for democracy and good governance."

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