

Land Commission for CHT needs reform

It is crucial to bringing complete peace in the area

FOOD and Disaster Management Adviser AMM Shaukat Ali in a roundtable on "Land Disputes in CHT: Ways to settling the issue" has broken a news. The present government is going to reconstitute the Chittagong Hill Tracts Land Commission. A new chairman and two full-time members will be appointed to the commission to facilitate its working.

In terms of the CHT peace accord, consummated more than a decade ago, a Land Commission was formed to primarily solve the long standing disputes between the indigenous communities and the settlers from plain land. With the signing of the peace accord, surrendering of weapons by the Shanti Bahini and return of tribal refugees from India, the protracted insurgency in the region was brought to an end. This is a major achievement in a trouble-torn area.

However, another important element of peace lay in resolving land disputes between the communities which remains virtually unaddressed today. This is why the news of reconstituting the Land Commission is so important. The commission we have seen working for all these years have done little. The much-vaunted cadastral survey has not taken place yet, without which documentation of land rights cannot be made. This is a very complex and time-taking operation; and we have already lost a good deal of time making a quick restart of the process highly imperative.

A durable solution to land disputes is a precondition for enduring peace in the region. The assurance from the adviser that government would investigate why lands in the CHT area have been handed over to settlers despite the ban on reallocation, reflects the right spirit of the government. The birth rights of tribal people must be protected at any cost. Chakma Raja Debasish Roy's recommendations for consensus between the commission and the regional parishad in settling the disputes and framing the required rules merit consideration. In the limited time at the disposal of the government it can reconstitute the commission and meaningfully set out its terms of reference and see the commission restart the work along substantive lines.

Saving the Buriganga

Strong, foolproof measures must be taken

ANY discussion on the Buriganga can only focus on a single point. It is that the river must be saved and allowed to go back to what it has historically been. And it is a point a recent seminar on existing conditions in and around the river emphasised on Monday. That a particular feature relating to restoring the Buriganga to its old position concerns its augmentation has never been in doubt.

At the seminar, experts noted that a budget amounting to Taka 616 crore would be required for a proposed 140-kilometre long augmentation route. Maintenance costs for the route will amount to Taka six crore per year. The issue here transcends any discussion of the financial resources involved because of the systematic battering the river has received over the past many years. Within such battering has come the problem of irregular dredging. Add to that the gradual encroachment that has gone on, turning the Buriganga into a shell of its earlier self at a number of points. As for effluents, they are a definite health hazard along with garbage and sewage dumping. Those who make use of the river water have contracted various ailments. There is a clear need here, therefore, for the government to take strict measures against the grabbers of river banks. Factories that have ignored guidelines regarding wastewater treatment must be made to comply with them.

One idea emerging from the seminar is the probability of transferring water from the Jamuna to the Buriganga during the dry season. With water in general being a serious issue and the Buriganga in particular up against all odds, such thoughts can be built upon. Already a number of rivers in Bangladesh are in their death throes. That dire possibility must not be allowed to affect the Buriganga, the lifeline for Dhaka city for ages. There is today an absolute need to ensure its uninterrupted and pollution-free flow.

CHARLES R. LARSEN

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Our 1971, our allies and our truths



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

A few individuals are outraged that some veteran Indian military officers were here recently to be part of Bangladesh's Independence Day celebrations. And they were outraged because they believe, and have always believed, that India has had nothing to do with our liberation in 1971. Of course we do not subscribe to that opinion, for it flies in the face of everything decent and everything that reminds us of values.

For anyone to suggest, nearly four decades after the Indian army joined forces with the Mukti Bahini to free Bangladesh of Pakistani colonial repression, that the Indians were not involved with our struggle seems like careless thinking. Worse, it makes you wonder why people who have always tried to convey an impression of being analytical about history, who have watched history unfold in their very presence, should now sound so bitter when it comes to acknowledging the truth.

And the truth is that without the Indian military's intervention in the war, the emergence of Bangladesh as a free nation in December 1971 would well nigh be difficult. Now, of course, you could argue, as so many

And so it was that the Indian people and government, as our allies, came in to provide us with all the moral and material support we needed at that point in time in order for our struggle for liberty to gather critical mass. It is a truth you cannot deny. If you do, you run the very grave risk of undermining the very truth upon which you happen to be a free individual today.

of us have always done, that a greater sense of purpose could have been injected into our nationhood had we been allowed the privilege of waging a long war of attrition against Pakistan and had we, in the manner of the Vietnamese, struggled long and hard before ejecting the foreign occupiers out of our land.

The Vietnamese first forced the French into retreat through Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Twenty-one years later, they repeated their triumph through forcing the Americans to leave their country in all the rapidity they could muster. It could well be that if we were given the opportunity to wage the War of Liberation in our own way, we might have waged that war for years on end.

Long wars do something wonderful to a nation's soul: they leave it tested for endurance and eventually give it solidity of purpose. A twilight struggle is a formidable step to a collective understanding of history.

But then, history always moves along in its own distinctive, inexorable ways. And about 1971, do not forget that in nine months the Pakistanis had done away with three million Bengalis. Had they been given more time, they would have murdered millions more. Yes, we agree that men shape history. But there are also the moments when

history gets ahead of the individual and pulls them along with it.

In essence, therefore, what happened in 1971 was two-fold. On the one hand, we outlined the way our history as a nation was to be; and on the other there were the currents and crosscurrents that added their own weight to the making of our history.

And so it was that the Indian people and government, as our allies, came in to provide us with all the moral and material support we needed at that point in time in order for our struggle for liberty to gather critical mass. It is a truth you cannot deny. If you do, you run the very grave risk of undermining the very truth upon which you happen to be a free individual today.

Now, these men who have tried telling us that General Jacob and his friends had no contribution to make to the rise of this independent republic we call Bangladesh, tend to forget that a mass of citizens far greater than any crowd they can gather on their behalf actually remembers the way things happened.

Ten million Bengalis found refuge in India. Our guerrillas learned the art of warfare at training camps in India. It was the Indian government, which agreed to the operation of the Mujibnagar government-in-

exile on its territory. At a time when the Nixon administration and the Chinese, to say nothing of countries in the Middle East, stayed ludicrously hostile to the Bangladesh struggle, it was the government of India and the political leadership in the Soviet Union which helped us disseminate our message of freedom to the world beyond our fields of battle.

These are truths we have not forgotten, despite the many and diverse differences we have since had with the Indians on matters of policy. Think back on the 1940s. The liberation of France, of other nations in Europe, was accelerated by the solidarity the Allied Powers demonstrated for the people of these occupied lands. No one has ever suggested that Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill had little or nothing to do with the restoration of French sovereignty. Charles de Gaulle administered the Free French government from London; and in subsequent years he ran into major disagreements with Moscow, London and Washington.

No one in his country has ever stooped to the parochial through suggestion that the foreigners who assisted France in regaining its liberty had no role to play in 1944. Look around you. There are the instances of Bosnia-Herzegovina

and Timor Leste and a host of other nations coming by freedom with not a little help from their friends abroad. Kuwaitis will forever remember the coalition of nations that freed them from Iraqi occupation in 1991. You do not see these nations getting into denial mode, for gratitude is what defines their perception of their history.

Ours happens to be a great nation in the sense of its being a symbol of liberality. Pore through its history one more time and you will have cause to arise in yet once again the truth of how its culture has emerged from a complex and healthy mix of thoughts. Ours is not a land where tribalism is the norm. Cannibalism is behaviour we do not condone. Ours is a society, which has always acknowledged the many contributions made to the growth of its heritage by a diversity of sources. The problem, though, comes in when anti-historical forces try to spring upon us the sordid untruths we could all do without.

Please recall that, in 1974, the communist Abdul Haq, having refused to accept Bangladesh as it came to be in December 1971, felt little embarrassment in soliciting Pakistan's material help in dislodging the government of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Such men called themselves Marxists, with that pronounced pro-Berlin leaning, and would go on calling their organisation the East Pakistan Communist Party.

There are men who look upon themselves as intellectuals in this country, individuals who have unabashedly told us that the Bangladesh war was but a struggle between two dogs, in that Cold War perspective. It is language that

unnerves you. And it is again language that depicts before you a class that stands forever ready to undermine the truth you and I have lived with all these years.

There are journalists who wax eloquent in their assessments of the arduous political struggle waged by Bengalis for autonomy and then political freedom from Pakistan. And yet, these very men will have nothing to do with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. They struggle mightily to convince themselves that Mujib is not Bangabandhu. For them, on November 3, 1975, it was not four national leaders, but four Awami League politicians, who were assassinated in prison.

Of course, it takes all kinds of men and women to people this world. But when absurdity is carried to improbable heights, threatening to make a casualty of history, you cannot but go red in the face before the rest of the world. You can go on exonerating foreign diplomats over their "interference" in your domestic affairs. But before you do so, ask yourself if such "interference" was not a direct offshoot of our own bad politics. You can choose to describe the visit of the Indian war veterans as a disgrace. How much of disgrace envelopes us a nation when you speak thus is a point you might wish to dwell on in your more sober moments.

Our circumscribed geography should be no reason for us to mutate into a society of narrow minds. We shoot ourselves in the foot when we deliberately choose to repudiate the contribution of other nations to our struggle for liberty. Ingratitude drills holes in our morality.

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Putting remittances to better use



HARUN UR RASHID

THE remittances from migrants contribute significantly to Bangladesh's socio-economic development. They have a multiplier effect, not only for the family members but also for the people in general.

It is reported that about 5 million Bangladeshi workers are now abroad, spread out in almost 100 countries. It is reported that about 92,000 found employment overseas last January, and that is a good record. Last year, about 832,000 Bangladeshi workers found employment abroad. 85% of Bangladeshi workers go to the Middle Eastern countries.

The number of women workers reportedly stood at 74,074 as of August 2007, according to Bangladesh Manpower Employment and Training Bureau. Of them 54,835 left the country in the last three and half years.

Some say that the figure will be more because many unauthorised agencies in the country are sending women workers abroad (only seven recruiting agencies are authorised by the government to send women workers).

It is reported that among the total expatriate workers, 6% constitute female workers.

BOTTOM LINE

The subject of remittances is, in the final analysis, inseparable from the broader issues of mobility of labour, ageing population in many industrialised countries, and international migration, such as the number and characteristics of migrants and the rates at which they return home.

Total remittances

Remittances from migrant workers crossed over \$6 billion in 2006, contributing 8.7% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the country. It is the second biggest foreign exchange earner for the country after the export earnings of garment sector that contributes 12.7% of the GDP.

This year, about \$7 billion are expected from remittances. By 2015, the target is about \$30 billion, and right strategies must be put in place to meet the goal.

Remittances are influenced by wage rate, exchange rate and relative interest between the sending and receiving states, and easy availability of facilities for remittances.

The interesting part is that semi-skilled and unskilled workers send money to their near and dear ones regularly, while the professional and educated migrants hardly send money to their families. Rather, they transfer money from Bangladesh to their places of residence abroad.

Why people migrate

Migration is a social process that is historically seen in a politico-economic context. During the 16th and 17th centuries, Europeans migrated to new countries such as America, Australia, Latin America and Africa for better quality of life and opportunity.

Some reasons for migration are:

- (a) Economic and demographic factors.
- (b) Civil wars and discrimination towards minority community.
- (c) Promotion of entrepreneurial skills.
- (d) Opportunity known to be available in foreign countries.

A study for Britain's Department for International Development found that three-quarters of African immigrants have university education, and roughly half of Asia's and South America's. Of the one million Indians living in the US, three-quarters of them have a university degree.

In future, the number of migrants from developing countries will increase because of the ageing population in the industrialised countries.

According to a report, in the next 30 years, the labour force in Germany will shrink from 41 million to 21 million, and in Italy from 23 million to 11 million. Japan will require about 90,000 a year, falling to a longer-term figure of about 700,000 a year.

Undocumented workers

The undocumented workers, otherwise known as illegal workers, contribute to the economy of the receiving countries. But they have no legal protection and they suffer from low wages, harassment and humiliation in the receiving countries.

Although they are engaged in

jobs that are known as 3-D jobs (demanding, dangerous, and demeaning, or dirty, dangerous and difficult), they are not covered by the 1990 UN Convention on the protection of rights of all migrant workers and members of their families because the receiving states have not ratified the Convention.

The Convention enjoins state-parties to ensure that the working and living conditions of undocumented workers should not be less favourable than those of national workers for the sake of health, safety, fitness and human dignity.

Bangladesh, together with other migrant-sending countries, may robustly campaign within the UN and other international and regional forums for the ratification of the UN Convention by the labour-receiving countries.

Suggested strategies

The thumb rule is, the higher the skill of the migrants, the bigger the remittances will be. The question is: how can the emerging labour market be captured by Bangladeshi workers? Many experts suggest that three essential strategies, among others, need to be put in place to meet the goals.

First, English-language, or foreign language, skill has to be imparted to migrants. Second, the establishment of vocational schools in the country so that well-qualified

trades-people, such as carpenters, auto-mechanics, air-conditioning technicians, joiners, masons, plumbers, and electricians can migrate overseas as there is a huge demand for trades-people in industrialised countries. Third, health care workers need to have international standard quality of education and training as they are in great demand.

Furthermore, women workers need training before they leave the country. Often, they are misled and abused by unauthorised agencies. Many of them fall victim to cheating, and they are not provided with the jobs they are promised.

In the government sector, there is, reportedly, one training centre in Mirpur and six centres have been set up in divisional level. Many more centres need to be set up, especially in the private sector.

These strategies could be in place through the joint initiative of government and private sectors. Bangladesh may derive benefit from the experience of the Philippines.

Remittances and certain open questions

Although remittances have grown to become a central factor in the domestic economy, the following issues need to be further investigated:

- How can government improve on incentive schemes to channel remittances to productive investments?
- Is there a role for micro-finance institutions in linking formal remittances to development?
- Is it feasible to pool migrants' savings and form mutual or pension funds?
- How can one bring about improvements in the existing

banking network in its ability to compete effectively with informal arrangements?

- Has there been any assessment in the context of the hypothesis that incentive schemes tend to meet with limited success when other relevant micro-economic factors are unfavourable?
- How does a financial crisis affect the issue of remittances?
- How to stop leakages of about 20% remittances through unofficial channels, despite various policy initiatives to steer remittances toward the formal banking or post office sectors?

The subject of remittances is, in the final analysis, inseparable from the broader issues of mobility of labour, ageing population in many industrialised countries, and international migration, such as the number and characteristics of migrants and the rates at which they return home.

The migration issue is not all about control of immigration but an issue of the 21st century, when demand for young workers will increase in the industrialised countries. Accordingly, there must be a sensible policy in which both sending and receiving countries may reconcile their interests for peace and harmony in the world.

Bangladesh, with its younger population, must seize the opportunity to send skilled workers to industrialised countries. The need for coordination and cooperation between government and private sectors is imperative. Hopefully, all stakeholders will rise to the occasion to have a compact with regard to smooth migration.

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Permanent war, mantra of fear and economics of disaster

Once they are gone, a massive mop-up operation will involve millions of Americans perhaps something on the level of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's WPA, rebuilding the country's crumbling infrastructure and polishing our tarnished esteem. Higher taxes for Americans, of course and strong incentives to save rather than to spend. But it's going to take a genuine leader to convince Americans that the country and its political system are worth saving.

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ANOTHER milestone: Four thousand Americans have now been killed in the war in Iraq. Pundits will moan and groan, but not very loudly. The general public will say ho-hum, since the war has largely dropped out of its consciousness. More disturbingly, the Bush administration's reason for attacking Iraq was retaliation for 9/11, even though it has long been proven that Iraq had no connection to that tragic event. How ironic then that the

total deaths on 9/11 (not including the 19 hijackers) amounted to 2974, significantly fewer than the deaths of America's armed servicemen and women in a war that should never have happened. But is anyone making these connections?

Americans pay little attention to the details of the war or the astronomical number of Iraqi casualties. The remaining few patriots are still convinced that the invasion was noble and long ago managed to stifle the voices who dared question, and

criticize, the entire façade justifying a preemptive strike and, worse, sending young Americans into harm's way. But wars particularly wars as poorly conceived and executed as the current disastrous one in Iraq have subtle ways of gnawing into the gut of the aggressor and growing like cancer, slowly at first but then, finally, destroying the corporal body or, in this case, the body politic.

America and unfortunately the entire world will pay a price for this war for the rest of this century. The literal expenses of

the war will cost the country in innumerable ways that few have imagined, not simply in dollars but in human casualties.

First, the literal cost in money/dollars. Government statistics that are already several months old cite double the requested (and already allocated) figure of \$804 billion dollars; thus, \$1.5 trillion, if the so-called hidden costs are included. What's hidden? Veteran benefits and expenses for the thousands upon thousands of injured soldiers expenses that will certainly last for another eighty or ninety years until the last vet of the Iraq war dies somewhere in a hospital around the year 2100. But many other estimates (the most recent by Joseph Stiglitz a Columbia University economist) say the \$1.5 trillion will easily double because it doesn't include a penny beyond the figures cited by the most recent

government estimate.

Are we any closer to ending the war? I doubt it. Even if a Democrat becomes president and pulls all American troops out of Iraq (unlikely) what will be the costs of withdrawal including billions of dollars of military equipment and reconstruction for Iraq? We can't simply abandon Iraq's reconstruction after we have destroyed their country.

Thus, the three trillion dollar figure looks rather low, even at this time. Already, the costs are so overwhelmingly burdensome that the federal budget has no money left for increases in any other program.

Virtually all on borrowed money. Use your house as a piggy bank and take out another chunk of money to spend once you have refinanced again. But since the United States government has done exactly the same thing

during the past eight years enormous tax cuts, printing and printing increasingly worthless dollars, and spending trillions on a war that can only be paid for by inflating our money--why shouldn't individuals do the same? Banks (not just in the United States) are beginning to collapse because of the sub-prime mortgage mess, as the economic cancer begins to metastasize in the rest of the world's economies ("They're all connected," economists tell us.) The icing on the cake: the Chairman of the Fed who admits he didn't anticipate the debacle with sub-prime mortgages. Tell me, Mr. Greenspan, if a stranger knocked on your door and asked for a huge loan, is it really true that you would give it to him without asking questions about whether he could pay it back?

America's folly, but the

world's disaster.

We are told that the mortgage meltdown is far from over; that housing costs will take several years before they will bottom out; that gasoline will be \$4.00 later this year (it is already that in parts of California) and a realistic striking price for gold is \$2000 to \$5000 per ounce. And the new Chairman of the Fed, Ben Bernanke, reduces the prime rate instead of raising it, inflating everything, so that only Zimbabwe is ahead of the United States with inflation at a rate we once believed inconceivable.

Is there a solution? A fix? Of course, there always is. But it involves pain and Americans do not like pain. We've lost our esteem in the world. Our currency has tanked and increasingly others do not want to use it. By fighting the wrong war, we've emboldened terrorists who cannot believe they have

brought America to its knees with so little effort. And our current leaders scare us with fear, their ubiquitous mantra.

The only thing we need to fear is our current leaders.

Once they are gone, a massive mop-up operation will involve millions of Americans perhaps something on the level of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's WPA, rebuilding the country's crumbling infrastructure and polishing our tarnished esteem. Higher taxes for Americans, of course and strong incentives to save rather than to spend. But it's going to take a genuine leader to convince Americans that the country and its political system are worth saving. Otherwise, we must anticipate the worst as the United States continues to drag down the rest of the world.

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