

A blocked Dhaka-Aricha highway

Regular highway patrols could avert such incident

THE Dhaka-Aricha highway was forcibly closed off to traffic for two hours by the agitated workers of a garments factory in Savar on Friday. It happened because one of the workers had been run over by a speeding bus moments earlier. In the course of the uproar, no fewer than fifteen vehicles were damaged by the workers and the situation could only be brought under control after police, RAB and soldiers turned up on the scene. The menacing reality is that such incidents have regularly been taking place in the country. Buses and trucks have hit and left students, workers and others dead and have quickly made their exit from the spot. The consequences, for others using the same road, have been horrendous. Their vehicles have either come under frenzied attack or they have been left stranded on the road for hours because it has been occupied by the angry protesters.

And that is where quite a few questions arise about the psychology which suddenly transforms a body of otherwise peaceful men and women into a ferocious mob intent on taking the law in their own hands. At the same time, how do the police explain the quick manner in which a speeding vehicle knocking down and killing an individual manages to flee the scene? Or, why no law enforcers take charge of the street before the agitated ones do? Even if the bus flees, why cannot policemen in the area pass on information about the fugitive vehicle to their colleagues up ahead as a way of halting it and taking the driver into custody? Or why indeed the police personnel are not seen trying promptly and earnestly to quell public commotion on the spot?

About a couple of years ago, a highway police system was inaugurated with much fanfare. It was given out that the highway police would check all violations of the rules of the road. Indeed, for sometime it was observed that highway police patrols using modern vehicles travelled up and down the roads. Today, it does not appear that the system has yielded any benefit. Such a condition calls for a clear statement on the part of the police authorities. Why the highway patrol police have not made any impact is a question calling for a swift, credible response.

There comes too a question of discipline, especially where reacting to incidents is concerned. Management at organisations such as garment units will be doing themselves and the general public a favour if they inculcate in their workers a sense of discipline and self-control. Grieving over the death of a colleague is perfectly natural. To go on a rampage over the death and damage public and private property is not. Some mechanism should be evolved to prevent backlash to accident in such a vulnerable area as Dhaka-Aricha highway. Our sympathies go out to the family of the dead worker.

Mro young men in CU

There should be more of them in higher education

WE congratulate the three Mro young men who have become the first in the community to enter Chittagong University (CU) to pursue higher studies. We are sure the entire community is basking in the glory of the three, and an example has been set for the people of other backward communities to follow. To get admission in Chittagong University is no mean feat, and the young men have done it with unwavering determination, sincerity and perseverance. We are sure they have won a big battle against many odds.

The Mros of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), about 70 thousand strong, belong to one of the backward communities that has little access to education because of the scanty number of primary and secondary educational institutions in the hilly areas. The lack of better communication facilities, lack of opportunity to receive education in their native language, shortage of qualified teachers and financial constraints are among other obstacles that are pulling back some of the ethnic communities in CHT. The annual drop-out rate in the area is about 70 percent at the primary level and about 40 percent at secondary level. Pursuing higher education, in college or university, is one option very few want to try because of economic conditions.

In an interview with The Daily Star, the three Mro men talked about free access to quality education as a fundamental right of every citizen of the country. But they hit the nail in the head when they mentioned that commercialisation of education that makes it prohibitive should be shunned. We cannot but agree with the young representatives of the ethnic communities that the dignity, culture, language and fundamental rights of the diverse communities all across the country must be protected and sustained. We would like to echo their sentiment that a society is more beautiful when it is diverse.

We take the opportunity to urge the government to set up more primary and secondary schools and colleges in the areas where different ethnic communities live. This is a basic right and we are sure many more young men and women from those communities will make the best use of the opportunity. Higher education will definitely help bring many of the communities out of the poverty cycle and into the mainstream of society.

For food autarky



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

BANGLADESH is expecting a bumper boro harvest this year, and the government is hoping that this bumper crop production would somehow relieve them of the economic and political crisis. The government has set a target to procure twelve lakh tons of rice and three lakh tons of paddy at the rate of Tk 28 and Tk 18 per kg respectively in this crop season to build up a food buffer stock. The government has planned to deploy all of its resources and gear up all relevant agencies under its control to make the boro procurement drive a success.

But the economists of the country have said a bumper boro harvest will only be a temporary respite and the government needs to take a concrete policy to attain food autarky to shield local market from global food price volatility.

Let us look to the Philippines, where the government is spending an additional \$36.12 million on higher yielding rice varieties and is implementing measures to avoid a shortage of the staple cereal. It has also allocated an additional 1.5 billion pesos to buy higher yielding rice seeds to be distributed during the coun-

try's rainy season to increase rice production. The Philippines has also announced a ban on converting farmland to other uses in the latest government move to cut import of rice.

A landmark UN sponsored report said on April 15 that the world would face social upheaval and environmental disaster if agriculture is not really reformed to better serve the poor and hungry. The warning in the report, which was compiled by about 400 experts of International Assessment of Agricultural science and Technology for Development, comes amid growing discontent among the world's poorest people over rising of food prices.

The report commissioned by the World Bank and FAO and considered by sixty-four governments at an international plenary in Johannesburg, stressed that agriculture as it is practiced today, is the source of deep inequalities and that the number of malnourished people world wide is continuing to grow.

While addressing the Global Agro-Industries Forum recently, the Indian prime minister Dr. Manmohan Singh said that agriculture in India is not just a food producing mechanism, but

BY THE NUMBERS

Bangladesh has no other way but to go all out for increasing food production at optimum level to evade the threat of global hunger. The farmers must be motivated enough to keep themselves fully engaged in food production and the government agencies must be sincere to support them with stable supplies of seeds, credit, fertilizer, and power for irrigation. Side by side, the conversion of arable lands for other uses must be stopped by enacting proper laws.

is the backbone of the livelihood security for about two-thirds of its population.

The Indian government has launched a good number of programs, including the Rashtriya Krishi Bikas for Rs. 25,000 crore, Food Security Mission for Rs. 5,000 crore and Horticulture Mission for Rs. 20,000 crore to promote agricultural growth and safeguard food security.

The small farm management revolution in China, Japan, Taiwan and South Korea has combined technologies of "mass production" and "production by masses" and stimulated farmers with marginal and small holdings to work for their income security in the rural areas and food security for the nation.

Bangladesh could turn into a food surplus country, provided the government ensures supply of quality seeds, fertiliser, diesel, and electricity to farmers in time. The government has to disseminate validated agricultural information to farmers and make sure that those are updated with latest technologies to get the best harvest and protect crops from any diseases.

These were the eloquent views of successful farmers who par-

ticipated at a workshop in the city on April 21, jointly organised by the Directorate of Agriculture Extension and some other government and private agencies.

The food production of the country, both rice and wheat, was only 100.46 lakh tons in the year 1971-72. Bangladesh attained self-sufficiency in food production in 1999-2000 when the country's gross production in rice and wheat reached at 249 lakh tons. The food grain production reached at nearly 268 lakh tons in 2000-2001, which was country's highest food production since independence. But the increasing trend of food production could not be sustained.

The total food production of the country rose to around 260 lakh tons in the year 2001-02. But the country had to import 20 lakh tons of food grain as the consumption of food grain increased. Of the total consumption, nearly 267 lakh tons of rice and other food grains were produced in the country and some 32 lakh tons of food grains were imported.

According to a government calculation, the country needs 255 lakh tons in 2007-08 for the population of 140 million, taking

495.04 grams per capita per day intake of food grains. The government has set the food production target at 254 lakh tons for this fiscal year. The country will require importing nearly 3.5 million tons food grains in 2008 following a big output shortfall due to floods and cyclone.

In the context of global food crisis, food autarky has gained paramount importance for the country in order to ensure survival of the poorer section of people. But due to lack of proper policies in the agricultural sector, the country could not attain food autarky. We did not even stress enough to strive towards a reasonable degree of food security.

According to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, diminution of the country's arable land is seriously hampering the government's initiatives to ensure food autarky. There was approximately 202,000 acres of cultivable land in the country in 1983 and has decreased to 143,000 acres in the beginning of 2008. In other words, the amount of cultivable land has decreased by 60 lakh acres during the last 25 years and the country will lose one-fourth of its cultivable lands by 2020 if it is not checked.

The quantity of arable land is diminishing because of unplanned construction of residential and commercial areas, shopping malls, educational institutions, industries, roads and highways.

The news which is really alarming for the nation is that, every day nearly 235 hectares of arable lands are being lost in the country and more than two lakh

new babies are being added every day to our overwhelming population of 15 crore.

All the government initiatives for food autarky will go in vain as the total food production is lagging behind the country's increased demand for food, as a result of rapid population growth in one hand and the quantity of arable lands are in decrease on the other hand.

Another cruel reality is that only few rich farmers, who have surplus saleable rice, get the benefit of soaring rice price. Out of three crore farmers in the country, only 15% have more or less surplus rice to sell after harvest. A vast majority of famers are compelled to sell most of their rice just after harvest to repay the debts and depend on the market to buy their food at higher price. The government should formulate some policies to protect the interest of these victims among the farming community.

Bangladesh has no other way but to go all out for increasing food production at optimum level to evade the threat of global hunger. The farmers must be motivated enough to keep themselves fully engaged in food production and the government agencies must be sincere to support them with stable supplies of seeds, credit, fertilizer, and power for irrigation. Side by side, the conversion of arable lands for other uses must be stopped by enacting proper laws.

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What ails Bangladesh



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

DESPITE assurances repeatedly being given by the interim government and other forces, there appears to be an apprehension in some quarters that elections may not be held on time (or may not be held at all) as the Election Commission is believed to have been unable to fulfill its works to suit the declared time frame.

This apprehension (and one would be hesitant to give any credence to it) would not be due to any "conspiratorial motive" alleged by the same quarters nor due to inefficiency that can be attributed to the institution. But, as many expected, the bickering among politicians, in this case between the two factions of BNP, could possibly delay the holding of the elections against the wishes of almost all the political parties and, of course, the general public of the country.

In case the holding of the

elections are delayed or the major political parties' dialogues with the government were to fail, then an unpredictable situation may arise that may not be to the liking of the major global powers and the major players in the politics of the country.

The new US ambassador James Moriarty lost no time in declaring that "further role of the army will isolate Bangladesh from the region and from others around the world." He conveyed the feeling of Condoleezza Rice that Bangladesh, "a country in transition in a region of the world vital to US interest," could help to bring stability and strength in South Asia. Even those who are skeptical nevertheless would give ears to the words spoken by the envoy of the only super-power in the world.

It would serve us well to comprehend the evolving definition of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Though Bangladesh is

GOING DEEPER

But in Bangladesh, the people having experienced various forms of government that failed to live up to the expectation of the people, we are inclined to go with Winston Churchill's conclusion that democracy is a terrible system of government but still better than all others that have been tried in the past.

nowhere as unstable as some countries in Africa and in the Middle East, we are faced with a myriad of challenges that seemingly appears to be impossible to solve.

The most immediate issue of concern is the price rise of essentials that has gone beyond the purchasing capacity of the middle and the poor class. One does not even consider the ultra-poor in this equation, as historically they have been victims of "hidden hunger" a semantic euphemism for near famine used by one of our policy makers. Faced with acute scarcity of food, and now joined by energy and water scarcity, many people may wish to give preference to solving their immediate needs than to give attention to intricacies of the governance that in the long run, given the kleptocratic rule of BNP-Jamaat alliance, could be of greater epistemological value.

The recent visit by the British

home secretary and her public acknowledgement of links between British and Bangladeshi terrorists is significant. During the so-called democratic rule, the presence of Islamic militants was vehemently denied by then government's self-denial that was shattered by bomb blasts in almost all districts of Bangladesh and it is now public knowledge that the Islamic militants were under the patronage of some political bigwigs now in detention. We thought, wrongly, that the terrorists were anti-American and anti-Christian, though neither premise should have been of any satisfaction to the civilised world regardless of religion that was practiced or the state of development that the affected countries were enjoying.

As terrorism developed, it has become transnational and the terrorists spared no one of any particular religion or any part of the world. They were indiscriminate in killing victims in Africa, Asia, the US, and the UK. They did not fit historian Bernard Lewis's description of Muslim "deprivation" and consequent "revenge" or a reflection of Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilisations."

The hanging of JMB leaders and detention of Huji(B) activists appear to have driven the Islamists underground only for a short while, as the violent protests by them has aptly demonstrated, in their view, to maintain the "purity" of Islam that is being allegedly violated by the authorities by proposing to give equality to women through enacting a women's policy.

Despite the fact that South Asia produced more female heads of government than any other region of the globe, gender equality remains a far cry in these countries, particularly where Muslims dominate, though this phenomenon is basically an indicator of underdeveloped society that is patriarchal and patrilineal.

Francis Fukuyama admits that democracy is not a universally valid or desirable goal. He asserts that "democracy is culturally rooted and that societies with other cultural background may choose other forms of government as they wish." Samuel Huntington while advocating liberal democracy for the

US makes this kind of case in his controversial thesis of the clash of civilisations.

If one were to accept Nietzsche's argument that modern democracy is nothing but secularisation of Western values, then in that part of the Islamic world where religion is deeply rooted and greatly influences human behaviour, then President Bush's democracy promotion in the greater Middle East is likely to face problems.

But in Bangladesh, the people having experienced various forms of government that failed to live up to the expectation of the people, we are inclined to go with Winston Churchill's conclusion that democracy is a terrible system of government but still better than all others that have been tried in the past.

Perhaps a middle course of Francis Fukuyama's victory of liberal democracy over all other forms of governance experienced by mankind and that of Joseph Stiglitz's suggestion on "moral growth" could be an answer. May be Ambassador Moriarty's remarks, putting aside the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Practices, could be given an expansive interpretation.

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Race catches up with Barack Obama

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Obama is faltering because, like Hillary four months ago, he is acting like the inevitable nominee. He is attempting to run out the clock on Hillary. He refuses to face the reality that Hillary is not going to go away. Even Hillary's victory speech in Philadelphia was more inspiring than Obama's reshaped "heard it all before" presentation.

FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

THE average of all the polls predicted that Hillary Clinton would win the Pennsylvania primary on April 22 by 5%. She won by 10%. Polls had also shown Obama winning the New Hampshire primary in January by 13%; but it was Hillary Clinton who won by 3%! Pollsters are aware of one dirty little secret of polling Americans: many whites are reluctant to say that they will not vote for a black candidate.

There are plenty of historical precedents. Democrat Tom Bradley, the African-American mayor of Los Angeles for twenty years (1973-93), was projected to win the California gubernatorial election in 1982. Surprisingly, he lost by less than 1%, giving rise to the term the "Bradley Effect," referring to the tendency of white voters to tell pollsters that they would vote for a black candidate, but then actually vote for his white opponent.

African-American Doug Wilder, who ran for the govern-

nor of Virginia as a Democrat in 1989 also suffered the "Bradley Effect" when he led his white opponent by 10% in the polls on the eve of the election, but ended up winning by less than 1%.

Through their persistent negative attacks and subtle race-baiting, Hillary Clinton, Bill Clinton and the Republicans have managed to reduce Barack Obama to just another black candidate.

In the Pennsylvania primary, 66% of the white women voted for Hillary; only 34% voted for

Obama. 56% of the white males voted for Hillary, 44% for Obama. White women constituted the largest segment of the population. It was because 90% of the blacks (only 10% of Pennsylvania's population) and a majority of younger voters picked Obama that the margin was not larger. 16% of Pennsylvanians said race was important in their decision; of those 75% voted for Hillary. So 12% of Hillary's 54.7% vote came from the race-conscious voters.

Of course that should not be news to Barack Obama. He knew that a certain percentage of white Americans would not vote for him under any circumstances. His challenge was to pick up those votes from other segment of population through his message.

Obama must have known also that other candidates were not

going to get out of his way; they were going to block it. Running for the US presidency is a once in a lifetime opportunity for the likes of Hillary (60) and McCain (71). They were not going to play dead just so this 46-year old African-American phenom could win the presidency.

With Hillary's Pennsylvania victory, the wind is behind her sails. She raised 10 million dollars within 24 hours of her Pennsylvania victory. She is shoring up her defence credentials by speaking in front of military personnel in North Carolina where she trails Obama. Her surrogates are everywhere reminding Indiana voters of Hillary's "game-changing victory" in Pennsylvania, as polls show Hillary taking the lead in that state.

And where is Obama? In Chicago for yet another strategy session. At this late stage it is

not a good sign to be reviewing strategy. Hillary has outwitted Obama in Pennsylvania. She was the much better candidate and talked about issues people care about economy, healthcare, and jobs. At the last minute she wrapped herself in the Star of David, threatened Iran and thus energised the Jewish voters, led by Governor Ed Rendell who placed the party machinery at Hillary's disposal. At the same time, Hillary kept Obama on the defensive by making his answer questions about Rev. Wright and "bitter-gate."

Obama is faltering because, like Hillary four months ago, he is acting like the inevitable nominee. He is attempting to run out the clock on Hillary. He refuses to face the reality that Hillary is not going to go away. Even Hillary's victory speech in Philadelphia was more inspir-

ing than Obama's reshaped "heard it all before" presentation.

To get his campaign on track, Obama must come down from his high horse and address issues that dog him. Once and for all he must denounce and dissociate himself completely from Rev. Wright and leave his church. He must explain what Michelle Obama meant by saying "for once in my adult life, I felt proud to be an American." If loyalty to his wacky pastor and his errant wife is more important to Obama than winning the presidency, then Barack Obama will not win the US presidency. He must somehow mitigate the snub to those who "cling to guns and religion," even though they may not vote for him. And Obama must get back to making inspiring speeches.

And he must fight Hillary

back. Hillary hit Obama mercilessly, thrusting the knife into him and twisting it, in the Philadelphia debate on April 16. Even in the face of incessant Hillary attacks, Obama passed up an opportunity to attack Hillary back for her Bosnia sniper-fire lying. Americans like a fighter, which Hillary has defined herself as. They do not like a wuss or a sissy.

If Barack Obama believes that with his seemingly unsurmountable pledged delegates tally he is the certain nominee, he should think again. Hillary's campaign now has the look of a freight train, with the undecided superdelegates on board, which might wreck the insurgent Obama's campaign and hand the nomination to the original inevitable nominee.

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