

# Country and democracy more important than individuals



MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

## CONSCIENCE & SOCIETY

Lifting of emergency is probably an issue where the political parties will have to put more of their thoughts on, and consider it keeping in view the present political situation. The government has already said that it would relax or lift it to the extent necessary, but some important provisions relating to law and order probably may have to remain in place for the sake of peaceful election.

With some political sense could see the advent of emergency, and extreme political chaos was basically responsible for it. Whether it was really necessary and worthwhile has to be left to the future for correct judgment.

### Return to democracy a must

The caretaker government (CTG) cannot continue for an indefinite period. The country must return to democracy by the year-end. My suggestion would be that all political parties should work towards making the shonglap successful. They may like to put the country first in their political agenda and go for the election, which is the only way to restore democracy. Free and fair election must be held peacefully, and power must be transferred to the elected government. This is also the promise of the CTG.

### The national charter

The effort of the CTG to establish a national charter through dialogue should receive adequate response from the political parties and the civil society. A national charter is apparently an agreement of all

stakeholders -- political parties, professional and business groups, representatives of the civil society etc -- on issues of national importance and public interest. Everybody agrees that we must not go back to a situation that led to 1/11.

Democracy must be set on a strong footing; no more political chaos in the name of democratic right. One's democratic right should not take away the democratic right of another. This must be understood properly by the political parties. In other words, there should be an agreement on a set of things that must not happen anymore. Some of them are related to amendment of the Constitution, and the politicians are right when they say that it cannot be done by this government. So, a priori consensus must be reached so that this document, signed by all concerned, remains in hand for the elected government to act on.

### Release of the two leaders on parole

The emphasis of the major political parties appears to be on two issues: The first one is, of course, the issue

of release of the two leaders of the two major political parties. This issue is, however, under the jurisdiction of the court. Everyone is equal in the eyes of law, but it is also politically recognised that some are more equal than others. The reasons are well known: one is the daughter of late Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and was the prime minister of the country. The other is the wife of late President Ziaur Rahman and she was also the prime minister of the country.

So, a political decision by the government on the issue, for the sake of participation of all political parties in the election, could be possible. There could be a possibility of release of these two leaders under parole for a specific period of time, with the understanding that they would return to their respective parties as party chairpersons, reorganise them on democratic lines, and select honest candidates for the ensuing election. The purpose is to return the country to democracy, which is a must. As I do not belong to any political party, I have just put it in the context of facilitating the holding of the ensu-

ing election. Anyway, it is upto the CTG whether to consider it favourably, keeping in view all other issues.

### Lifting of emergency

The other issue is the lifting of emergency. This is probably an issue where the political parties will have to put more of their thoughts on, and consider it keeping in view the present political situation. The government has already said that it would relax or lift it to the extent necessary, but some important provisions relating to law and order probably may have to remain in place for the sake of peaceful election. There must not be "free for all" affairs during election. Anyway, emergency is a temporary thing, and will certainly go away with the restoration of democracy. Indeed, nothing should stand in the way of holding the general election in December 2008.

### Other dialogue issues

For restoring full democracy, several other important issues have to be debated, and the agreed ones are to be recorded. There could be many issues, but the ones which

are of serious interest to the people of Bangladesh may be, inter alia, the following:

- Election is a must, and all barriers in the way of holding it should be removed.
- All should agree to participate in the ensuing election, and all controversial issues on election must be sorted out before it is held in December.
- Election must be held peacefully without application of muscle power, money power etc. Anybody found doing so must be declared disqualified.
- Any specific violation in any polling booth has to be handled appropriately by the EC to make the election acceptable.
- Election results should be acceptable to all participants.
- Parliament must be accepted as the main pillar of democracy, and the only place to debate all issues of people's interest.
- No parliament boycott; temporary walk-outs are, however, acceptable.
- Any MP remaining absent from the parliament for more than a month without proper reason, and with formal approval of the speaker, should lose his/her membership of the parliament.
- Hartals to be banned. No street demonstrations and vandalising of vehicles. In case any political party insists on declaring hartals as a democratic right on an issue which appears legitimate and cannot be solved otherwise, must agree to call hartals peacefully and must not stop others -- i.e. the people who do not want to join

hertals. Shops also should be allowed to remain open if they do not want to join hartal. All markets for essential commodities must remain outside hartals.

- No politics and political activities, including lathi processions, in the campuses and educational institutions. No political party should have any political unit in the educational institutions. If some students, even before becoming graduates, are interested to do politics they may do so, but they have to do it outside the educational institutions. When they return to the campus, they are students and NOT political activists. They can, however, place education-related demands with the authorities in an appropriate way.
- Teachers may also participate in politics, but they must do it outside campuses and educational institutions. When they return to the campuses, they are teachers and NOT politicians.
- If teachers and students are barred from doing politics in their work/study places, other professional bodies like business and industrial chambers and associations, trade unions, bar councils, doctors' bodies, NGOs, government agencies, banks' associations etc., must also be barred from having political fronts on party basis in their premises and work places. These bodies shall, however, be entitled to work for the advancement of their own professions, businesses etc. The members of these bodies, if they want to join politics,

should also go out of specific areas of their activities to do so.

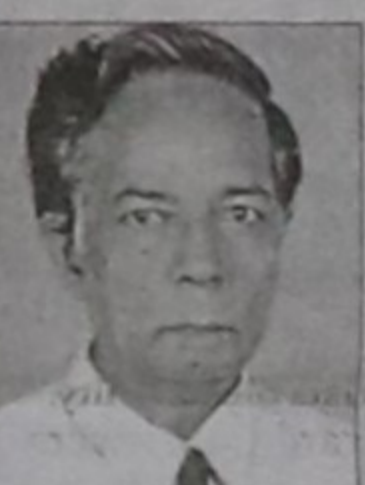
• The specific part of the Article 70 relating to MPs losing parliament membership in case they speak or vote against party line should be deleted.

### Institutional independence

Finally, all administrative changes which are considered good for the people, particularly the ones relating to institutional changes, should be maintained. The issue of "independence" of the institutions has to be understood properly. Nobody is independent in this world. All institutions must remain fully accountable for their work and performance. They must act as per law of the country, and be required to explain their work and performances to the people. In other words, all activities of the institutions should be overseen by appropriate bodies set up by the parliament for the purpose. These bodies could be parliamentary bodies and/or citizens' groups. The parliament must be the focal point for democracy, hence it is a must to elect honest and capable persons as members of the parliament.

Muslehuddin Ahmad is a former Secretary and Ambassador, and founder VC of North South University. He is also the Chairman of Civic Watch Bangladesh.

# Surging crime: Arrest this dangerous trend



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

## BITTER TRUTH

It really baffles people when law enforcers become violators of law and indulge in crimes and dastardly activities that pollute the environment and corrode the society. Happily some of these violators who enjoyed patronage by their godfathers in the past days even after committing most violent crimes are now being booked.

admitted that police failure and neglect of duty led to such dangerous and alarming situation. Small wonder, the underground operatives have regrouped themselves and launch attack on innocent citizenry and even the police outposts taking advantage of the lax police action and callousness of the lawenforcers.

The country is witnessing a sharp deterioration of law and order situation in recent times. The fragile peace that held for more than a year has been shattered. Coming up with increasing frequency, grisly acts of crime have put a blot on the image of the country. Undoubtedly, the grisly killings of two minor boys Jewel (9) son of a rickshaw puller and Piblob (7), son of a private car driver are acts of barbarism. In a primary investigation report revealed by the investigation officer it was learnt that the boys were killed after cruel tortures as evidenced by stab injuries on

various parts of their bodies. Ramna police recovered the decomposed bodies on 2nd May from an abandoned house in Nayatola. Detective branch of the police who have started investigation into the matter are yet to nab the killers.

Another report carried by The Daily Star on May 7 last indicated that muggers riding motorbike and armed with pistols and machetes stabbed two employees of a plastic raw material shop at Lalbagh and snatched Tk 24.50 lakh around 11 a.m. on May 6. Ironically as reports reveal Lalbagh police station was only 50 yards away from the crime scene and law enforcement personnel did not turn up even when they made good their escape after firing pistol shots and exploding bombs to scare the locals who tied to overpower them. Another report carried by the same daily on May 3 last indicated that unidentified armed assailants killed one

Ferdous (26), a building material supplier at East Jurain by pumping at least 15 bullets in his person. While people fret and fume over the series of brutal incidents like extortion, looting and killing of innocent citizens, it was learnt on May 1 last, as reported in a Bangla daily, that extortionists robbed an industrialist based in Narayanganj of about 4 lakh taka from within Sonali Bank at Narayanganj and made good their escape without anyresistance.

Beating, rape, murder, ransom bid, acid burning of school and college going girls or even young house wives and young women garment workers, now becoming victims of rape in larger numbers, are the images of violent crime associated with the most deprived individuals in the country. Because of the increasing and sickening frequency, no one is as much shocked any longer of such atrocities committed by mobsters, drug

pushers or psychopaths.

A report carried by The Daily Star and some Bangla dailies on 3rd May last indicated that Nurjahan Begum (25), a garment worker at Adabar thana died of taking poison after being gang-raped by six persons including the landlord of the house she used to reside on April 25 last. On 26th April her brother went to Adabar thana to record a rape case which they didn't entertain at that time. But after her death police recorded a rape case and arrested three of the rapists. Trishna, a young college girl and daughter of Tapan Dey of Chaumohani was being chased by the hoodlums in the area on her way to college. Sensing fear and loss of family prestige, she was married off to a person at Kachua, Chandpur. But that couldn't prevent her from being a victim of further attack by the monsters. And this time the hoodlums desperate with devilish design abducted her on her way to

her husband's house at Kachua with her brother by an auto rickshaw on April 26 last. With clues from her brother, the auto-driver who worked in collusion with the abductors has been nabbed but the victim girl Trishna and alleged main culprit Mamun could not be traced till now.

It really baffles people when law enforcers become violators of law and indulge in crimes and dastardly activities that pollute the environment and corrode the society. Happily some of these violators who enjoyed patronage by their godfathers in the past days even after committing most violent crimes are now being booked. As reports reveal, Kazi Mizanur Rahman, former OC of Patkelghata thana in the district of Satkhira has now been chargesheeted for killing his second wife Sabiha with attempts to bury all records of killing after her murder. So also the Assistant Commissioner of Chittagong Metropolitan police who reportedly masterminded the most despicable act of robbery on February 10 last at the residence of a businessman in Amirbagh residential area in the metropolitan city while on duty has now been booked.

While the news of booking the law enforcers committing crime

bring some relief to the agonized citizenry, the alleged death of Sirajul Islam (52), a farmer in Chokoria village at Cox's Bazaar as reported in The Daily Star on May 16, in cop beating has raised eyebrows about the police action going so perversely wrong in another corner of the country. The report added that Shah Alam, a manpower agent in the locality took Tk 3 lakh from Sirajul's son Nurul Amin and his friend three years ago with a promise to send them to Malaysia. As Shah Alam failed to send them to Malaysia, they demanded return of their money. On May 12 the youths caught Shah Alam and handed him over to local U.P. chairman and as the arbitration was in progress, Chakoria police dragged the plaintiffs to thana to resolve the matter. Locals allege, at one stage of altercation in the meeting, S.I Hafiz beat up the two youths mercilessly and when Sirajul stood in protest, the S.I also beat him up. Sirajul, in a critical condition was first taken to Chokoria Hospital. He succumbed to injuries while being shifted to Chittagong.

Now the point is: there was no obvious reason for the S.I to come to a meeting presided over by the UP chairman who was trying to resolve the matter and haul up the

plaintiffs and beat them unreasonably that led to the death of elderly farmer Sirajul.

In any case whatever the findings of the police investigation, the cops can't evade the responsibility of the charges made against them. The impunity with which criminals strike has reduced the metropolitan cities like Dhaka, Narayanganj, Chittagong and Khulna to being the country's crime capitals. With journalists and civic leaders becoming victims of harassment and assault by criminals and sometimes by a section of frenzied law enforcers, as it happened in Satkhira in the recent past, the media is mounting pressure on the police to get a hold on law and order. But any progress is yet to be seen as every day an increasing number of incidents are being reported in the media.

With police investigations in most of the cases making little headway, a sense of fear has gripped the citizenry. And like the criminals themselves, the fear will continue to stalk them until the law enforcers do what they are supposed to do.

Md. Asadullah Khan is a former teacher of physics and Controller of Examinations, BUET.

# Urban poverty: Disquieting phenomenon

MONIRUL KHAN and KHALEDA ISLAM

ACCORDING to the estimate of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 43.2 percent of the urban populations were below the poverty line as recent as in 2005. In aggregate it included 14.8 million people. In percentage point poverty reduced but not in terms of the number of people. For example, in the estimate of 1991-92 the percentage was 46.7 while the aggregate population was 6.8 million, the jump was by more than cent per cent, just in one and a half decades!

The reason for concern does not end here if we pour over a few other statistics. For example, per capita caloric and protein consumption in the urban areas came down in the same period - in 1991-92 the caloric consumption was 2258 Kcal, reduced to 2193 Kcal in 2005. Similarly protein consumption was 65.49 gram in 1991-92 which came down to 64.88 grams in 2005. Although the school enrolment of the children in the age group 6 to 10 rose from 76.2 percent in 2000 to 83.98 percent in 2005, the average months of ailment from chronic diseases increased from 76.8 months to 77.54 months in the same period the former set of information gives a positive scenario while the latter a negative one. But further disturbing fact lies elsewhere, the food expenditure in urban areas has become costlier. In

the year 2000, the urban population on average spent 44.6 percent of their income on food, needed to spend 45.17 percent in 2005.

In the context of Bangladesh a huge migration of rural population as a consequence of livelihood failure in the rural areas has contributed to urban poverty. For example, major occupational groups among the urban poor include rickshaw puller, wage worker of different categories, primarily unskilled, and the household maids and in terms of origin all of them are migrants from rural areas. For various reasons livelihood failure in rural Bangladesh has been taking place in a routine manner, a few instances follow.

The number of landless households in rural areas increased from 6.3 million to 7.9 million during the period 1991 to 2001 or from 40.84 per cent to 41.22 per cent. A very large population increase has certainly contributed to the landlessness through the process of household splitting. For example, rural population increased from 89.0 million (in 1991) to 99.5 million (in 2001) in a period of just ten years. There are a number of natural calamities such as river erosion, flood and cyclones which add to the destruction of cultivable and home-land, cattle head and other production materials. For example, one estimate shows that during the period 1982-1992 three major rivers of the country the Ganges/Padma, Brahmaputra and Meghna washed

The poor women are doubly exploited and in the context of urban poor in Bangladesh this point is clearly applicable. Such exploitation begins at the family, marking the workplace and community. It is said that at Dhaka 50 to 60 percent of the married slum women are compelled to hand over their income to husbands. Regarding physical violence to the married women in the slums it is also said that at Sylhet 80 percent women face such consequence while psychological torture is a common phenomenon.

away more than 1 million hectare of land affecting more than 3.5 million rural households.

Huge migration of the rural people into urban areas of Bangladesh cannot be matched with the jobs available. In most cases supply of labour exceeds demand bringing down the level of remuneration the function of a simple economic law. Since the jobs in which the urban poor are engaged are not exclusive in nature and thus draw new entrants on easy terms pushing up the supply side. For example, in Dhaka city 2 to 3 rickshaw pullers now compete to rent one rickshaw for driving. Their low remuneration level is an important factor for urban poverty which (remuneration level) is difficult to push upward. For example, earning more than Tk 200 a day is not easy for a rickshaw puller who often maintains a family of 4 or 5 persons. Similarly a wage worker cannot earn more than Tk 150 to Tk 200 a day. On the other hand disease and inclement weather make it difficult to earn every day. These disadvantages are

coupled with the very high prices of food at present.

The urban poor mostly live in the urban slums. In how much penny they pass their days needs to be understood to assess their condition. Most of the slums are congested in the extreme sense. Each family lives in a single room which on average ranges from 100 to 200 sq ft, which also includes the kitchen. Each family consists of 4 to 5 persons or more than that. Most slums are densely populated, sometimes a few hundred families living in an area of 4 to 5 acres. Minimum practice of privacy is another feature of the urban poverty, young children very soon get exposed to the adult affair since they live in the same room. In terms of location many slums are built on awkward places such as river bank at Barisal or hill slope at Chittagong. Physical condition of the slums are in most cases poor, rooms are damp and wet round the year, can hardly withstand the natural events like storm or heavy rain because often these are made of the cheap materials like polythene, bamboo and thatch. However, with

the emergence of private slums particularly at Dhaka it is slightly different although the threat of eviction is perennial whether it is a public or private slum.

In terms of utilities also the condition of these places are miserable. Hand tube well is the common source of drinking water and that is also extremely inadequate. For example, at Rajshahi as many as 50 families of a slum depend on a single hand tube well. In places like Barisal, or Sylhet the access to safe drinking water is extremely limited in the slum areas. It's no better in Dhaka, of course. Safe sanitation is significantly limited, 20 to 25 families use one single toilet in some slums. Poor drainage is common in most slums resulting in water logging. According to the City Corporation rule without a specific holding address one cannot get access to the supply water and sewerage which often is lacking in the context of slums.

In terms of health the urban poor are mostly distressed. For example, several diseases are widespread which include water borne, air borne, contagious, gastro intestinal,

venereal and gynecological types. It also shows 80 percent slum dwellers in Dhaka are suffering from skin diseases. Diarrhea and dysentery is another health menace affecting the urban poor -- roughly 50 percent of them suffering from it. Similarly malnutrition and gastro-ulcer is widespread, more than half of them suffering from it. Easily one can understand from the above that how little food can be accessed by the urban poor! Several other diseases such as jaundice or pneumonia routinely appear on the scene.

Diseases which are normally associated with the high income group such as diabetes and blood pressure are also surfacing among the urban poor. Another dimension of their health distress is the widespread dependence on the medicine shop attendants for their need but the quality of services there is equally poor. It is alleged by the urban poor that the doctors in the public hospitals often encourage them to seek treatment from the private outlets which are

extremely expensive and entail heavy dependence on costly medical tests not always 'necessary' in the eyes of the urban poor. Often the urban poor need to depend on the traditional healers.

Very limited access to quality education is another dimension of the urban poverty. The primary schools where the children of the urban poor study are backward in most respects. Physical environment of these schools distract their attention from study while the number of teachers are equally inadequate. Class teaching is mostly ineffective, a common complaint is that the students cannot understand what is taught in the class while the urban poor do not have enough money to afford private coaching like the middle class. As a result drop out rate is very high among the urban poor. Hardly 2 to 5 percent of their children take admission to the secondary school. On the other hand parents are interested in the income of the children engaging them in child labour very early on.

There is a saying that the poor women are doubly exploited (i.e., in terms of class and gender) and in the context of urban poor in Bangladesh this point is clearly applicable. Such exploitation begins at the family, marking the workplace and community. How widespread is it? It is said that at Dhaka 50 to 60 percent of the mar-

ried slum women are compelled to hand over their income to husbands. Regarding physical violence to the married women in the slums it is also said that at Sylhet 80 percent women face such consequence while psychological torture is a common phenomenon. Those who return home from work at late evening face different types of sexual harassment which they even cannot disclose. Administration (e.g., police) is hardly sympathetic to such victims when the perpetrators are politically backed. On the other hand criminal activities and vulnerabilities are also on increase in the slums. For example, slum dwellers are used in drug business or mugging by the powerful people. Old people and the widowed women are particularly vulnerable among them.

By next few years slumization will take place at such a vigorous manner that some experts fear that more than 50 percent of the urban areas of Bangladesh will come under a dense habitat. Already there are about five thousand slums in Dhaka city alone (comprising about 60 percent of the country's total), with a population of more than 3.4 million. There is no time to delay the action.

Monirul Khan is Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Dhaka and Khaleida Islam is Professor, Institute of Nutrition and Food Science, University of Dhaka, hseg@bdcom.com